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ROYAL ROGUES

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BY
ALBERTA BANCROFT

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

TO MY SEVEREST AND MOST
ENTHUSIASTIC CRITIC
SARA BANCROFT FRY

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ROYAL ROGUES

I

THE TOWN OF FAIRIE.

"RUDROON, there is a moving beyond the hills!"

"A dream, comrade in sorrow, a dream."

"I hear them! Many folk; and in haste!" persisted the other.

"Go to Thorn Rose's Palace of Sleep, Helder," yawned his brother. "Your brawling will not wake *our* Palace Guards: they sleep more soundly than those of our cousin's keeping, even," and the speaker swung his heels and drummed on the table. "'T is as well: awake, they look at us more than half askance, since our staying here means they miss the Grand Spring Rallying."

"It may be messengers from King Goldemar," Helder said hopefully, "to bid us——"

Rudroon laughed.

"Not he! When the Royal Princes must be made

an example of, there is no unsaying what has been said. ' My lords, for this, your more than wayward deed, we and our Queen and all our court forego the pleasure of your presence when we take our yearly way across the kingdom to the Borderlands, to our brother kings.' My cap and plume ! I hear him still. And now, they go curveting over hill and hummock, all of them, to the tune of wild bird and stream and leaf, and many 's the elfin band that meets and greets them ; and the spring that blooms so fresh and free for them, blooms in tame gardens behind a wall for us."

Rudroon yawned again. Then he moved impatiently.

" Helder, it was a fool's trick of yours to tie that ancient gentleman, our teacher, the worthy Grammarius, to the pillar of the tower hall and leave him there to instruct the royal cats and mice. Could you not have known his high-sounding wails would wake echoes to bear the sound away and that my royal lord, the King, must choose that very time to pass below and hear ? Now, instead of two hours to listen to Grammarius, or not, as the humour happened, we have him all the day ; him, or no one at all. That tying was a deed — Helder, I blush for you ! "

" I tell you, I hear them on the road ! " Helder cried excitedly, his back turned, his hands on the frame of the tower window.

" Peace, worthy one," drawled Rudroon. " If you wake him so early, we shall have knowledge crammed down our throats till midnight. King Goldemar's jest

"'I TELL YOU, I HEAR THEM ON THE ROAD!' HELDER CRIED EXCITEDLY."

even-time, and a shining haze cloaks the dimples of the hills. It lies far, very far away ; but if you have the eyes to see, look to the west at sunset season, and you may catch a glimpse, pricking out of the mist, of the spires, the winking turrets of King Goldemar's far-famed capital. It may be, even, that you will hear the Elf-land bugles blowing, those horns the poets love to tell about ; and then you will know that the King has been away, and comes riding home again ; or that he is about to set out to see to his kingdom throughout the moonlit summer night.

It was here that royal Goldemar had brought his Queen, whom he had stolen from the halls of men in the Valleylands; for King Goldemar had been a merry enough gad-about in his younger days, and had not always cared to look after the doings of the great tribes over whom he had been called to command. And it was here that were growing up his two sons, Rudroon and Helder, who joined to the mischief of their Elf-father—and the Witchdames know that was enough!—another mischief, which the Elf Folk could not understand, since it had its birth down yonder in the valleys where the Queen's family had lived many hundred years. Yet it is safe to say that never in any Fairyland were two princes loved by their people as were the puzzling, maddening, laughter-loving twins of our story.

And merry, maddening times they had of it—in spite of the teachers who came by the will of the King and

Queen to teach the little Highnesses the wonderful elfin knowledge, and some little of the knowledge which the Queen had learnt as a child and which was necessary to those who were ever to see the Valleylands. But better than any learning — whether of Fairyland, which lay all about them and which they loved so well, or of that other land which they were always hearing about and never saw — the twins loved to escape from the great Palace where they lived and wander through the Town of Fairie, hobnobbing with the Elves they met.

Yet wherever they might wander and whatever they might see, there was one spot that held more fascination for them than any other one place in their father's kingdom; and that was the Street of the Cap and Plume, where Puck and the Kobold Crowd had their dwellings.

It was for this spot that Rudroon and Helder now made.

The Palace Guards turned their eyes the other way as the two royal pairs of legs disappeared over the garden wall: it was not their business to keep their young lords *within* the Palace grounds; that was Grammarius' lookout. Grammarius slept: the four royal legs waved, vanished safely over the wall, and made for the Street of the Cap and Plume so fast as the royal feet could go.

The din from the Kobold stamping ground greeted them from afar; and with squeals of delight they

bounded into the broad street, shouting greetings and calling on Puck and other cronies to show themselves. In answer to their shouts the slim, brown-clad figures swarmed from their houses and into the street; the brown-peaked caps, each decked with a dangling plume, were waved in the air; the short cloaks fluttered up and out, as the Kobolds loosed the sign of their Koboldhood, the red Elf-lanterns swinging at their belts, and thrust them forward in token of welcome to the young lords.

They were a sight to see, were the Kobold Crowd! Such wild black eyes; such quick, lithe bodies; such strong, straight limbs! They charged up and down the Western Hills like a whirlwind; and their pranks in the Valleylands, their battles with hostile Elf clans and with the mortal men who opposed them, made most of the Fairy history of the day. Quick in anger as in delight, mad at the thought of a frolic, or the hint of a fight, they were a mighty elfin power; and, since they were a free clan with none to command them now that Oberon's rule was over, *that* king could count himself lucky who was able to bind them to himself in friendship; for they would be his surest defence against threatened danger.

King Goldemar was quick to see this, and glad enough to set a street apart for them in his city — a long, wide street, with houses on either side — and to give them each the Belt of the Town of Fairie, which placed them under his protection against any other

kingdom in the Western Hills. But better than all this, he entered Rudroon and Helder in the wild Crowd so soon as the little Princes were old enough to understand the honour of being admitted into the Kobold fellowship; and by this means he bound the rovers more securely to himself and to the Town of Fairie than if he had used all the Fairy spells that all the Witchdames could have made for him.

So it came that Kobold caps perched on the wayward heads of the twins, and red-lit jewelled Kobold lanterns swung at their belts, and that they in turn unhooked their lanterns, thrusting them forward in answering greeting, as they made their way down the Street of the Cap and Plume.

Puck sat crosslegged before his door, polishing his lantern and humming bits of the Kobold Chorus under his breath. He was chuckling and frowning by turns, as he pulled the twins down beside him one on either side; and half the swarm of brown-cloaked fellows that lounged around the door, busying themselves with their belts and lanterns, were laughing and frowning as he. Yet the laughter lay uppermost, and they all seemed wonderfully pleased with themselves. But for all that it was plain to see from the marks on their clothes and the fighting light in their eyes that the Kobold Crowd had come from a broil.

They had been down in the Valleylands, they said. That the twins had guessed: one could not wear the Belt of the Town of Fairie, and fight in the Border-

lands of the Western Hills; and the wild fellows each wore, flaunting across his breast, the belt King Goldemar had given him. By the red lanterns which they held, thus they swore, twelve hours before they had little thought of seeing the royal Palace for many a long day! No; nor the Town of Fairie, either; since it was of all forlorn holes the worst to be within a day's running of from the Spring Rallying till the time of "Harvest Over" down below,—and they pointed off towards the east, to the lands of the mortals.

The twins nodded. They knew what it was to see clan after clan flit away to the Spring Rallying and the summer wanderings that followed, and leave the Town of Fairie behind in lonesome grandness.

As it was, they cared little enough for the Western Hills in the spring season, the Kobolds did. Yesterday, now—wild cries of laughter broke in upon the story which a dozen, or more, were trying to tell their royal comrades in Koboldhood—yesterday, they had come from one of the homes of men; a stupid enough place, it was true, where the folk live, not more than a handful of them together, and tear up the ground with the help of animals—a pretty way of doing things, since animals had never been made for anything but to run wild in the woods and serve as sport for the Fairy Folk! The Kobolds explained that they had loosed the poor beasts that were dragging strange weapons through the ground and killing the flowers and grasses that grew there, and that the valley men had not been

pleased by the deed. There had happened—well, it was not good that the Princes should hear, since such tales were not for royalty; but after all was over, they had decided to go away from that place until the men should have forgotten the little happening; and they had camped in one of the gorges that led from the Hills down into the Valleylands.

It was a fair enough place, Puck admitted. There were spring scents such as all Fairy Folk love; there was darkness and coolness; there were pale flowers to look at; there were moss banks to lie upon; and there was a stream. It was a fair spot. They lay upon the moss banks, and felt the coolness after the heat of their meeting with the valley people — when, of a sudden, they heard weird noises, something such as men make at nightfall in the village square to dance by,— of course, the royal Kobolds knew nothing of those things; but down below mortal folk acted that way,— and looking down the gorge they saw, acoming towards them under the shadow of the new-leaved trees, wading waist-deep in the stream, a fellow with a wreath of water-flowers on his head, a fool of a Waterman, twiddling the strings of the thing he held and making noises! By the plumes they wore! the din was such that any selfrespecting Elf, who had heard the Piper of Hamel and knew what real music was, would wish for death while listening. They had been about to enter into dealings with the Waterman, so the Kobolds told the Princes with broad, delighted smiles, when a

rush and roar turned their eyes up the gorge, and, as they looked, a whole clan of Nixies and Watermen launched themselves from the cliff above and came whirling down upon them.

What had happened after that the Kobolds did not clearly relate. They shook their heads and told of the slipperiness of the Water Folk: having once fairly seized them, one was yet never able to hold them. They showed dripping waterlilies: it appeared that all the crew, men and maids alike, had been crowned with these strange flowers. And most wonderful of all, they brought out the thing on which the Waterman had made the noises, mimicked the way he held the two parts, and with shrieks of laughter tried to play upon it.

They said they had come to the Street to repair their lanterns, which had suffered from the stream, and that before nightfall they would be off again, to—well, it might be back to the gorge and on down to the Lowlands. There was no telling. The Watermen had gone on down the gorge.

They were muddy and grimy and marvellously happy; and it never occurred to any of them to ask how it happened that the twins were at the Palace, when the Palace Folk and all the Town of Fairie had gone away to the Borderlands to the Spring Rallying.

But the longer the twins listened, the sadder they grew; the angrier that for so small a piece of mischief they should have been so heavily punished; the more

anxious to—to—! They surveyed the caps upon their knees; the lanterns at their belts. They were Kobolds, truly and for always; and when the Crowd paused for breath, Rudroon, as the elder of the twins, announced that he and Helder were going back with them to the gorge after the Watermen. They were Kobolds: it was their right; they were strong and old enough to keep the racing pace; and, for the rest, they did not propose to be left behind.

Puck put down his lantern and stared. The group around the door gasped, then burst into cheers: it would be sport beyond the wildest imagining, to have their young Princes along! But soberer thoughts soon followed. There was the King; and King Goldemar was not a person to be trifled with. They shook their heads, as the more wary drew a picture of the ruler's anger at their misdeed; they prated that it was good for the young to study and grow wise and never heed to the counsels of mischief.

In the midst of their talk, Puck, looking up, saw on the faces of the twins a look which brought him to his feet with a bound. He had seen that look before on an older face, and knew what it meant. Advice, arguing, smoothing over was of no use now; neither could he give in to the royal rage for fear of one still greater. The Crowd must be off at once, he said; they would all see the Princes again before many days. His call for gathering rang out over the Kobold dwellings, and in less than a minute the place lay deserted: Rudroon

and Helder stood in the empty Street, looking after; and the doors of the houses slammed in the wind.

In the Street of the Cap and Plume Rudroon and Helder stood, half dazed. It was the first time Puck and his band had gone against them; and they could not understand it.

"Always the same!" Rudroon burst out at last fiercely. "They are all alike, these Fairy Folk! A merry time for all, only not for the Princes of the Realm: *they* must be patterns for everyone to look at, the Princes! *They* must live in the Palace, while others are free to live in wood, or field; they must have Folk about them, while others can go alone. They must learn, learn, study, study, about the Western Hills and about the Valleylands below; yes, *they* must learn, but the rest can go down and see and breathe and live in the Valleylands. The rest can know what the true joy of living is, while the Princes — from time to time, the Princes can *hear* about it! Oh, it is maddening!" and he stamped his foot.

"Helder, can you not speak!" he broke out again. "What good is it to sit moping there on Puck's doorstep? Can things be worse anywhere than here? Can folk anywhere be worse? Those men down in the land below that we are never allowed to see are more than half our kin, as it is; and these Fairy Folk——"

"My Prince!"

A strange voice directly behind one, when one

expects nothing more than a brother's half-smothered retort, is startling; but Rudroon on turning found that the words were not to him. The brownclad speaker was bending over Helder; he placed something in the boy's lap, and then darted off again and out of sight.

Helder looked down at the gift.

"That is the fiddle they took from the Waterman," he said gravely.

Helder knew well enough what a fiddle was: Grammarius had drawn him a picture of one, and explained its use. This one was old and worn, with a curious tracing on its thin back.

"And that was Kaldah who gave it me," he added after a moment.

"Kaldah is the only one of the Kobolds who is worthy of the plume," Rudroon announced decidedly.

"Yes," said Helder.

He picked himself solemnly up from the doorstep, and confronted his brother.

"I do not like the Palace, and I do not like Grammarius, and I do not like the Town of Fairie," he remarked soberly. "And I am not going to stay here any longer. I am going down to the men in the Valleylands below."

Rudroon's anger gave way to utter astonishment. He looked at his twin, stupefied. The younger Prince continued, unmoved.

"I am going, now; because when Grammarius learns that the Crowd has been here and has gone, and

that I too am gone, he will think that I am with them ; and he will be much afraid—so much afraid that he will not dare to send word to the King, but will try to catch me himself, he and the Guards ; and these Guards are stupid and too slow to be of the King's Band. By the time they have found the Kobold Crowd I shall be far away."

The Prince Helder smiled a little, meek smile.

" Besides, Grammarius has little fondness for Puck, and, at first, may not believe him. By the time that he believes that the Prince Royal is not in the Crowd I shall be gone still farther."

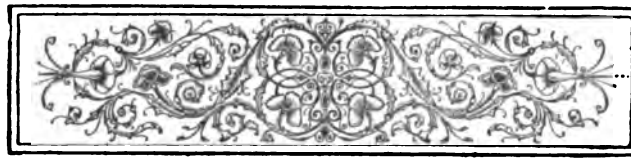
There was another little smile.

" I shall take this with me, because Kaldah was sorry and gave it me, and I like Kaldah," and he tucked the fiddle under his arm.

Then he started off.

" You may come too," he said, graciously, looking back, " if you care to."

" I come," Rudroon answered in awestruck tones.



II

AT THE BAUERNHOF.

IT was evening time at the Bauernhof. High-piled waggons were creaking home from the fields; cries and crackings of the whip came from the teamsters balancing atop. There was a lowing of cows and a clatter of hoofs in the yard; a group of maids trooping to and fro between the sheds; song and laughter and much bustling work: and the level rays of the sun turned all the air to gold.

Old Klaus Nickol, the master of the Hof, stood in the doorway of his big stone house and looked into the stir. He was a contented man. His buildings were a village of themselves, a rival to the real village, a mile back in the valley; his fields and meadows numbered more than any peasant's on the Arn, and the Arn was a long river; his men and maids made a clan, a people of themselves, and were spoken of as "The Nickolaner" in the country round about. He smoked his pipe in stolid satisfaction, and tried to hum the bass of the refrain that was being tossed to and fro by a dozen voices.

At another door, more directly overlooking the yard, stood the only child of the Hof, the young, motherless mistress of the place, a girl of sixteen or seventeen. But there was no look of content on her face as she stared into the lively scene; rather something between tears and a frown in the eyes, while the mouth looked as if it hardly knew whether to pout, scold, or laugh.

"It is no use," she called out, speaking without turning her head to someone in the room behind. "You cannot finish before sundown, as it is, so you may as well put the wheel by. One would think from the way you handle the flax you had never seen any before you came here. Push back the wheel, Hilde: and come and look at these men."

A goodnatured laugh was the answer, and a second girl stepped into the doorway. She wore the dress of the Nickolaner servingmaids, and stood straight and slim beside her mistress.

"Now, see those men!" Gertrud commanded. "Do they seem to you other than the men we see daily, tramping the highways, or in the village, or in the towns at the great marketings? Do they?" she repeated impatiently.

Hilde gazed into the crowd.

"I do not quite know what you mean," she answered at last.

"I mean, do they not look like *men?* Would you, would not anyone say they are men, plain serving-

men (Burschen), such as the peasants have on every place about? Do you see anything strange in them?"

Hilde shook her head doubtfully, and asked, "What should there be strange about them?"

"Then you have not heard! Do you know they say we are getting a bad name among the villagers and on down throughout the valley, because our fields bear a great yield,—as it has been fifty years past, sometimes more, sometimes, but not often, less, with the acres of the Nickolaner,—because our cattle and sheep thrive; because we can churn more butter from the cream than others; because our linen is finer and our clothes more daintily made."

"They are jealous," Hilde announced in a fine voice of wisdom.

"Yes, but do you know what they *say?*" Gertrud asked indignantly. Yet the question sounded as if tears were not far off. "They say that we are watched over by Witch Folk—*Witch Folk*, Hilde! That the Witch Folk work for us, and that *that* is the reason our yield is greater than any in all the country."

Hilde looked disgusted, and shrugged her shoulders, as those who consider a thing too silly to wrangle about. Then she grew doubtful.

"Yet, there are many black eyes out yonder." She nodded out towards the yard.

"Hilde, your own eyes are black!" Gertrud warned.

"Do my eyebrows grow together over the nose?"

Hilde flashed back angrily. It was as if the greatest insult had been offered her. "Besides," she added after a moment, "it is not given to all to have eyes that are big and blue and beautiful."

Gertrud smiled and put out her hand, asking pardon.

"But even the black-eyed fellows, Hilde," she said —the young voice sounded eager and anxious—"even they, look at them! Would anyone think—? Why, the smith yonder, he is so shy, he dashes into the smithy and slams the door whenever a maid passes the yard. And me, even; it is the same with me! Of course, if I knock, he must open, but he stands behind the forge, and never lifts his eyes, and looks *so* unhappy, as if he would rather than anything jump from the window and a thousand miles away. *He* has black eyes, Hilde — true enough, one rarely sees them, but he has them — yet one would never dream of taking *him* for one of the Witch Folk."

"That is true," Hilde assented gravely. "He has not the build, and he has no such waywardness and forwardness as marks the Elves."

"Then take Hans," Gertrud went on more happily. "Look at him now! Did ever anyone see such a stupid! There! He has fallen from the waggon and thinks himself hurt. Did ever any Witchman fall, or hurt himself either? *His* eyes are black, Hilde."

"Faith; no!" Hilde protested. "They are a dirty brown: and besides, Wittig pushed him. What think you of Wittig, Mistress Gertrud?"

Mistress Gertrud coloured hotly, and pretended not to hear, and the two girls went within to their work. It was not until after the evening meal, after the tables had been cleared for the morrow and all business of the day was over, that they found themselves together again, alone, as before, on the step.

The men on the benches around the stable door were joking: one fellow stretched on the low wall was telling a tale at which the others laughed, and now someone began a song in the twilight. The refrain came strangely sweet across the yard and the gardenbeds to the two girls on the stoop. It told something about

> "The lithe and lawless Fairy Folk,
> The merry Folk in green";

but the singer stopped in the middle.

"That is one thing which I do not understand," Hilde then said dreamily.

Gertrud's eyes were turned inland away from the Arn and towards the village.

"One cannot go out into the fields when the men rest at noon, but one hears them talking about the Elves——"

"The Witch Folk, you mean," Gertrud corrected absently.

"Yes, the Witch Folk. One cannot cross the yard in the even-time, stop at the village forge, or on the village green at night, but one hears gruesome tales of 'Witch Folk.' Yet, as to *seeing* them! Why

do you people here in this valley think such things? What makes you say there are Witch Folk, who come and live upon your peasant places and work for you? How do you know?"

"Hilde, those are not even child's questions," Gertrud sighed, half impatiently. She still looked out into the dusk. "'How know?' Well enough, of a surety. They have done it so often, and even if they try ever so hard to hide what they are and act like men, they always forget at last, though it may not be for months, or years; and then we know. Or it may be that some other of the Folk come and tell us, because they hate *them*. Or it may be at a village dance: that happens oftenest, for then the Water Folk and the Wood Folk and the Field Folk that are not men come into the village—they love the music and they love the dancing, and they cannot stay away—and when the Strange Folk see their cronies playing at being people as we are, they speak to them in the Witch Folk's tongue, calling them by name. Then all disappear together, like that," snapping her fingers, "like a flash, and the servingman, or the servingmaid, is never seen again. It has happened in many valleys; but not often here, and now, not at all for a long time. There is, too, another way of telling: if your maid asks for a green skirt, if your smith asks for an old sword, instead of wage, then beware."

Hilde pondered for a while.

"It seems great foolishness," she then announced

with a shake of the head. "What should the Witch Folk want to leave the woods for, where they are free, to come and work all the day and many days for men?"

Gertrud straightened up.

"What a question!" she said scornfully. "Where is the pleasure of running around in the woods in the rain and the wet? They are very poor, the Witch Folk; they have no clothes and they have no homes—Hilde, what ails you, to fall sprawling on the ground so unmannerly? Sit up! What will the men yonder think, if they should chance to look over! And your face is as red as your bodice! As I say, the Witch Folk come to us because they are better off with the peasant people than they can possibly be anywhere else. That is plain enough. Did you hear anything coming down the village road?"

Hilde heard nothing.

"Then look at the growing moon and be still," Gertrud recommended crossly.

But Hilde was not content with this: she had seen the growing moon before, she said. She clasped her hands over her knees and put another question to her mistress.

"If it is the way of the Witch Folk to come and hire themselves out to the peasant people and if it is the way of the peasant people to take them——"

"It has never been way of ours," Gertrud said stiffly.

"But if it *is* a way," Hilde persisted, "why should you be angry to have it said you do what may be done in any peasant house on the Arn and is not thought amiss of?"

"It is not that," Gertrud explained; and her voice trembled. "It is not that, Hilde. It is that they say we use the Witch Folk to go to other people's fields, to their dairies and spinning rooms, to harm the crops and spoil the flax and cream; and that *that* is why Klaus Nickol prospers and others do not."

"That is fool's talk!" Hilde cried hotly, hardly waiting for the other to finish. "Who told you that old woman's tale?"

The answer did not come readily.

"It was when Gregor was last here," Gertrud finally stammered. "There were words and——"

"I see," drawled Hilde.

She picked a pebble from the gravel-walk and threw it into a flowerbed.

"Master Gregor has been here four times within the last ten days," she said. "Each time the mistress of the Nickolaner sat in the dusk at her window, and listened to the songs which a fool who stood beneath chose to sing to her; a fellow with black eyes and sullen brows, who has a good word for none, a smile for none—but the mistress, and rarely even for her,—who is boorish with all, even with Bauer Klaus, and fears no one, save perhaps Karl, smith of the Nickolaner forge. A good-for-naught——"

"No, Hilde," Gertrud interrupted, "he is no good-for-naught. He works as none other in all——"

"I grant you the work which is portioned to him is *done*," said Hilde soberly. "But who shall say that it is he who does it? Why does he always beg to go to the meadows down yonder and to the fields skirted by the Arn, where there are no houses and no windows to pry upon him; and why does he always go alone? There is a tale among the Burschen, the working lads, that a mist hangs over the fields where he goes to make the hay, even when the sun shines bright on all others. Some say they have seen him coming from wood and meadowland across the Arn, when he should be busy on our side; yet his work in the Nickolaner fields is always done. And there is a tale that Hans, who drives the greys, has seen strange figures making off into the mist when he goes down to bring home the sheaves."

Gertrud did not answer. The singer of the early evening began afresh.

"If Master Gregor warned you against Wittig he did well," Hilde went on hurriedly; but Gertrud motioned her crossly to be still; and the tones from across the yard grew in richness and filled the night:

"There 's a castle in the mountains,
There 's a palace in the sea;
There are streams with hidden grottos
That are cool and fair and free.
You can hear the voices calling
From the rushes on the shore,

And they promise you the wonders
Of their wonder treasure's store.

"See! The meadow banks are misty,
And the meadow banks are low;
There is but the sound of singing
That will guide you as you go.
'T is the time, the time to answer:
Answer, which one shall it be?
There 's a castle in the mountains;
There 's a palace in the sea."

"What madman's howling is this about castles and palaces and the sea that spoils the sight?" cried an impudent voice from the road.

A rush of feet sounded across the yard; a whirlwind swept up to the stables, overturning benches, scattering men on the ground. Then on around the corner.

"Wittig! I might have guessed it! Thinks he is out of sight and safe."

There was the sound of a scuffle, after which the new voice again was heard.

"Now, let there be a little quiet, that those who are not loud-tongued enough to drown the brawls of 'rushes by the shore' may at least have an hour's peace after a long day and hard toil."

The sound of more scuffling; then came a laugh, a merry, mocking laugh that had its like among none of the peasant people in the valley.

"Friend Wittig, your little tricks for another, not me: my years are more than my looks say, and my wisdom is that of all the age of the earth. 'And they

promise you the wonders.' Faith, 't is true : I promise you wonders and to spare if there be not silence here for the next hour and more. By the gold of the sun and the hills where his evening colours blaze, I am of a thankful heart that *my* master has no such screech-owl to wake men o' nights when it is their right to sleep ! ' Answer, which one shall it be,' friend Wittig: quiet, or a most wondrous and thorough drubbing ? "

The whirlwind overleapt the stone wall, raced up the garden-walk, and came to a halt at the doorstep : a slip of a lad, tall, slim, with an impudent, merry mouth and impudent black eyes to match. And the even brows joined over the nose !

" Fair Mistress Gertrud," he began,—his cap swept the ground as he bowed before her,—" my best good evening and that of my master ! And Master Gregor bids me ask if you will but smile on these flowers,"—he laid them at her feet with a flourish,—" and cast your lovely eyes along these lines, which it has taken him the last two hours and more to pen ; otherwise I should have been here before the moon turned bright to gaze on the comeliness which——"

" Man, give the lines and less voice along with them," Hilde advised dryly.

" To hear you speak is music in my ears, fair Hilde," was the answer; and the lad put his hand to his heart. " No need to go within, sweet mistress : I will hold my lantern so that you can read ; and, as for what stands written there,—this day three days there is to

be a merrymaking upon the village green. The valleys are bidden. Master Gregor would know, will you do the kindness to grant him the first, the last, and as many dances more as you will please? He chooses no other maid."

"That is a pretty lantern you carry, Yokel," murmured Gertrud, blushing over the paper.

"Yes, mistress. It is the last memory of my poor home," and Yokel heaved a great sigh; whereupon Hilde giggled.

"What word shall I take back with me?"

He took a step nearer the maid as he spoke to the mistress.

"I will give him the dances, Yokel," Gertrud answered shyly. "But I will write my answer," and she went into the house.

"The longer the answer the happier the master," Yokel called after in his impudently clear young voice, "and the man,"—he was quite close to Hilde by this time,—"and the maid!"

Here he put his arm around the maid, and, some thought overcoming him, burst into wild laughter as he stood upon the stoop.

"Come out into the road, Hilde: there are such wonderful stones to look at on the road. And, then, no one can see us."

Another laugh rang out over the garden.

But Hilde held her head high, and did as though she would have nothing to do with him before she went.

III

THE STRANGE PLAYER.

"OF a surety," said Hilde, "this is a pretty sight. I have never seen this before," and she sighed contentedly.

Since early afternoon she had been at the merry-making: she had stood before the booths edging the green; she had seen the rope-dancer, and the man who ate swords and glass, and the man with the wise poodle dog. But now dusk had crept into the humming village: the gaudy booths, the scattered village houses seemed to step out of sight, sinking away among the trees, or the vines and gardenbeds. And now the moon made all things wonderful; only the moon could not drive away the shadows under the beech- and the linden-trees on the green — not even with the help of the lanterns which the village lads had swung here and there among the branches; neither could the moon light up the strip of woodland beyond, the thin strip of woodland that stretched away to the Arn.

With the night many newcomers had crowded on to the green; men and maids from Bauernhofs and

villages farther up the valley, who had been walking all afternoon, or had come down the river in boats, and had only arrived in time for the evening's dance. The strangers were easily known by their dress and the way of wearing the hair, which differed among the peasant people all the way up and down the Arn.

Now a shout went up from the Burschen. A platform was dragged forward under the linden-tree which marked the centre of the green ; the village fiddler was hoisted upon it ; the crowd of onlookers pushed back ; and the dancing began.

Hilde stared into the maze.

" Of a truth," she said under her breath, " there are many things to see," and her head nodded in time to the music. " I must go over yonder and stand by the fiddler and watch him," she muttered to herself, and was about to move away when Gertrud came whirling by on Master Gregor's arm; and Master Gregor's face was one smile.

Gertrud's eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed. She paused just long enough to whisper, " Wittig has not come at all!" Then she danced on again, laughing.

But two chuckles followed her ; and Yokel, who stood behind Hilde, laughed outright.

" The eyes they have, these people ! The eyes ! " and he shook his head, laughing. " There stands Wittig, leaning against the linden-tree, and has not left her with his look since dusk."

"He followed her all the afternoon, her and Master Gregor."

Hilde shrugged her shoulders.

"And there at another tree stands smith Karl, glaring at Wittig: and a thunderstorm in the eyes of both. Your mistress does not see, nor my master; they have brushed by, touching the two three times in the dance."

Hilde did not answer. She was no longer looking at the dancers; her eyes were fixed on the farther end of the green, where the strip of woodland came nearest the village.

"Hilde mine, will you dance with me?" Yokel giggled in her ear.

Hilde nodded towards the wood.

"Look!"

"Fair maiden, will you dance with me?" another voice asked at that moment, and a newcomer bowed before her; slim and straight and of Yokel's build, as well as one could judge, for the fluttering cloak hid much of his figure.

His voice was low and soft; yet the girl started and with a half gasp turned back to Yokel; but Yokel had disappeared. The other, without another asking, put his arm about her and whirled her into the measure.

"Your foot is as light as a fairy foot," he whispered, bending over her. "You dance like an Elf of the Hills. Tell me, is Mistress Gertrud so grateful to you as she should be for your bringing her to shore that day she all but drowned in the Arn? And you who

had never seen her before! Is she a good mistress to you — maid Hilde?"

"Fair sir, is it custom of your land to wrap cloaks about you, so that none can see your faces, and to draw hats over your brows till your eyes are hid?"

Hilde's sauciness seemed to have returned, to judge from the impudence in her drawling voice. Perhaps, after all, she had not been startled.

"Maid Hilde, there are mists that rise from the river Arn — you yourself saw them slipping from the wood a moment since — they make the air chill about your village," and he pulled the cloak more tightly about him. "Tell me, how goes the spinning and weaving at the Nickolaner Hof?"

"Do you fear the mists that come from the wood?" Hilde flashed back.

She did not pretend to answer his question; but she no longer tried to search the face which he kept hidden.

"Do you fear the Folk who come from the Hills?" he retorted. "Fear is a good thing to take with one when one goes to a new country; that, or a cloak to hide the face when there is need,— maid Hilde. Now you——"

A smothered cry sounded behind them. Hilde wrenched herself free and turned to find herself face to face with Wittig; Wittig, with clenched hands and white, drawn lips, and a look of rage on his face. Who was it who leaned there against the fiddler's stand and gazed moodily into the dancing throng? The man

whom Wittig was glaring at with eyes that had a glance for no one else? The tall man with the great, dark cloak floating about him and the eager, shifting, unhappy look on his face?

Now the dance came to an end. The stranger reached up and took the fiddle from the wearied player; he cuddled it in his arms as he tuned and bent his head to the purr of the strings. Now he put it to his shoulder. Wittig's face grew more tense; he drew in his breath twice, heavily. The stranger lifted the bow and jerked his arm to free it from the cloak.

A long, sweet note arose on the air.

Wittig darted into the crowd.

"Yes; they are all blind," Hilde observed aloud; but no one listened to her.

They were all pressing around the stranger, open-mouthed in their wonder at his music. Then, with one accord, the couples again began dancing.

Hilde turned. Her partner of the moment had vanished.

"It is likely I was mistaken," she told herself. She looked for Yokel; but Yokel was nowhere to be seen.

Master Gregor was staring stupidly into the crowd about him. Could he not see where Gertrud had gone to? Wittig had passed straight before him, had picked the girl up in his arms, and was making off with her. No one of all the crowd took notice: they were shouting and dancing, wildly, madly, as if lost to reason.

"Master Gregor is a fool!"

Hilde stamped her foot.

"Why does he not follow and bring her back, if he has wished so badly to dance with her? I shall tell him what my thought of him is."

But at that moment Gregor turned on his heel—he was very angry that his partner should have slipped from him—and struck off up a village street, the opposite way from the one Wittig was taking.

Wittig and his burden had all but reached the wood, the strip of wood that led down to the Arn: and still no one took note of what was happening. The dance went on madder than ever.

"Then I must follow," frowned Hilde; but the music kept calling, calling. It would not let Hilde go and she turned back towards the stranger with wide, excited eyes; then, unwillingly, away again. Wittig had by now disappeared into the wood, and—had there been no one but Hilde to see what the blackbrowed fellow was doing? There went smith Karl, lumbering after with great strides.

"Then all is well," Hilde sighed; a great sigh of thankfulness. She need not follow, now: Karl had reached the edge of the green over yonder.

"Did I but think that?" the girl asked herself wonderingly after a last quick look.

He had paused for a moment, the big, shy smith; but had he really looked around? Had his eye caught hers in a swift, backward glance? Had he beckoned,

"THEN WITH ONE ACCORD THE COUPLES AGAIN BEGAN DANCING."

had he called before he plunged after Wittig into the blackness of the wood? Or had she merely thought it?

However it was, all was well: there was nothing now to take her from the village green, where the peasants still danced and the music kept speaking, calling louder, more earnestly than before. She found herself close to the fiddler's stand and the stranger; closer and closer, till she stood directly before him, drinking in the melody, watching the play of the fingers and the sweep of the bow.

"That is as it should be done; that way and no other," she kept saying to herself.

At last the music came to an end; and the tall, dark man, whose eyes had been piercing every face that whirled before him, and every face — the old, worn faces — that edged the circle around the linden-tree, handed the fiddle back to its gaping owner.

The panting peasants scattered to the benches. They eyed the stranger curiously, and they whispered together; but they no longer pressed about him. He swept the green with one more glance, eager, yet contemptuous; then he turned to Hilde.

"You liked it?"

She nodded.

"You like the music of the fiddle better than other music?"

Again she nodded.

"Perhaps you know something about fiddles?"

He pointed to a bench as one who is master, who

cannot be denied. The bench stood in the black shadow of a beech-tree, away from the fiddler's stand, where there were no listeners. Hilde went over and seated herself upon it. He followed and sat beside her.

"Do you know anything about fiddles?"

Hilde smiled up into his face.

"No."

"Can you play?"

She shook her head.

"Then perhaps it is that you have *seen* many fiddles. There must be a reason," he added impatiently; "why should you care more than the others?"

Hilde said nothing.

"Look you," he cried, "do not try to play with me. You will bring sorrow to yourself. That tune is a spell: not for dancers only — the stupid dance and go mad with the dancing; but those who love the fiddle, or know to play upon it, or who have one,— those cannot leave while I play. They must stand and listen, even if they would go. I know.—Now, answer me." His voice grew sterner. "Which is it? You say you cannot play. Then, perhaps, you own a fiddle. Yet how should you, a girl, come by a *fiddle?* Ah! you have *found* one! That it is. You have found a fiddle, and do not know what to do with it. Is it not so? Answer me! Answer!"

"I have found no fiddle," Hilde said steadily.

He glared down at her, where she sat at one edge

of the bench, her hands crossed in her lap, her eyes on her apron.

"Then what can it be?" he muttered. "The spell never fails. Never! Perhaps—perhaps you *have* seen a fiddle," he said aloud, more hopefully.

"What gain is it to me to answer your questions?" frowned Hilde, rising from the bench.

"You shall not go until I am answered," he cried hoarsely. "A small fiddle, scarred and broken. No use to anyone. I can give a new fiddle, bright and big, to make loud noises and delight the heart. No! I will not have it that you go. I will have my answer!"

He seized her roughly by the arm, but dropped his hand with a cry of pain and stared into the girl's face. Something new gleamed there in the great, black eyes. It almost seemed as though she were laughing at him, deep down in her heart.

"Who are you?" he stammered, clutching the hand that had touched her arm.

The girl did not answer, but looked him full in the face. Then, "What is it?" she asked, and her eyes lighted; the pucker left her brow; "what is it that keeps calling, calling, and will not be gainsaid? There is the dance in the music for those who wish to dance; and there is the wood and the birds and the waterfall for those who wish to dream; but above all and through all there is the voice. It says 'Come! Come with me!' and you must up and after. What is it?"

The stranger's eyes gleamed beneath his broad hat.

"My fiddle!" he cried wildly. "You have touched it. It has taught you, or you could not know, not hear. Tell me! I will——"

"Have a care," whispered Hilde. She had not moved. "Have a care, or you will hurt yourself," she repeated softly.

His hand dropped to his side; but the fingers kept twitching, opening and shutting.

"It is so small, so very small. So useless," he said miserably. "A very little fiddle, old, and——"

"Yes," Hilde interrupted; "little and old and worn. You have said it before. And what did you say was traced on the back, traced ever so lightly and not easy to see; a flower, did you say, a water-flower, beautiful——"

A cry of delight broke from the man's lips. He clasped his hands and rocked to and fro.

"My fiddle! My fiddle!" he crooned, folding his arms, as though he already held the treasure within them. Then he again started forward.

"Give me the fiddle!" he commanded.

She looked up at him.

"Give me the fiddle!" His voice broke as he towered above her.

"What did you say was the voice in the music, that called? I heard, but cannot catch it. What was—Take care,"—ever so softly,—"you will be hurt. What was the voice?"

"But my fiddle!" wailed the man. "You have seen it; you have touched it; you know it. What does it mean to you, so old, so small! I will give you another; two others; big, big, to make a noise, a great noise to deafen all folk. Where is the fiddle?"

"What is the voice that calls? Teach it to me," said Hilde mildly. "Sit beside me here on the bench and sing it low in my ear. . . . Over. . . . Now, once again, till I know it all. . . . No; again; more slowly, that I may know it even when you are not here. You need not speak. Sing! Your question comes after — your question and its answer. . . ."

"Now answer me!"

The man was white with the anger that few people see in the faces of others and live to tell of: but Hilde was not looking at him to see it. Her face was turned to the green, where the dancing had begun again to the droning tunes of the village player.

"Do you know the country hereabout?" she asked indifferently. "Yes? Do you know the Bauerhof of Klaus Nickol; have you heard of him and his many fields?"

The stranger's eyes glistened, and he pressed closer.

"There are many Folk work for him; many."

Hilde bent forward, pushing the grass with her foot.

"Many Strange Folk."

Then, suddenly, she looked up at him. His glance wavered and fell.

"Do you know them?"

His head bent, ever so little.

"Do you know one with black, black eyes and frowning brows; the one who never smiles, and whose hair clings in damp rings to his forehead?"

The man started up with clenched hands.

"Master Player, have you ever heard his name, his true name?" Hilde leaned forward, whispering. "You know what he calls himself down yonder." The stranger's face was like a stormcloud. "If you would learn of the fiddle, Master Player, ask him! Ask——"

Suddenly, without warning, two arms went around the girl from behind, lifting her from off her feet, high into the air; two arms like iron. Someone taking great strides upset the bench and carried her away, away from the beech-tree and across the green where the peasants danced.

IV

THE BERGSCHMIED'S TALE.

"WHY do you not come when I beckon?" smith Karl growled, setting her down, but gently, at the farthest end of the green, away from the beech-tree and the linden-tree, and far away from all the crowd of rollicking merrymakers.

But Hilde was in a fine rage.

"*Why* should I come when you beckon? And what do you mean, coming upon me and bearing me off, rude one? And what have you done with Mistress Gertrud? Can you not answer, fellow?" and the small person glared at the burly figure before her.

Though Karl fairly shook at being thus raged at, he nevertheless held her tightly by an apronstring and made stammering explanation.

"Mistress Gertrud is at the Nickolaner Hof, safe, and—and—and——"

"Finish with your 'ands': I like them not," scolded Hilde. "Why have you done this?"

The smith looked the most unhappy of men: words would not come to him.

"Look you, little maid Hilde," he stuttered at last, "you have not been long in the country here, and there are many things that you do not know."

Hilde cocked her nose wrathfully.

"Is it not enough for you that I say that it is not well for you to be yonder on the village green?" he asked anxiously. "You see I am very tall," and he stretched his free arm upwards in a mighty manner.

"No. It is not enough," Hilde retorted severely. "A fine reason, that, your being very tall. Why have you done this?"

The big smith pulled at the hair all over his head. His face was very red, and he stared right and left for help.

"Have you ever heard of the Witch Folk?" he burst out at length in a hoarse whisper. "The Witch Folk; that is their name here in the Valleys."

"I have *heard* of them," drawled Hilde, edging away from him.

"Yes, and you have not the sense to see them," growled Karl, following her. "If you had—Do not try to go away," and he laid hands on the second apronstring. "Look yonder, now. If you had the sense, you would see that there are among the dancers Folk who are not at all as the people of these Valleys."

"I see no Folk. Where are they?" queried Hilde with lifted brows.

She seemed to be forgetting her anger, but her scorn was boundless.

"Well," and Karl sighed a great, awkward sigh, "then I must show them to you; but it would have been better had you taken my word instead,—less trouble and less talk. Look you," he went on, "there to the right! You can feel the damp of their garments from here even; and the scent of the waterlilies that they twine in their hair, it takes the breath away. They float as they dance—can you not see?—like ripples on the river; and they dance as no maid of the Valleylands. Ugh! They are chill, the three who go gliding by with three of the village lads. And there, at the farther end, near the linden-tree! Five more: beautiful, but a worthless lot. Why can they not stay where they belong, and not come here to turn the heads of the Burschen. *They* are of the Witch Folk, Hilde; Water Witch Folk; the Nixies; a useless tribe and very evil."

The smith's voice growled and rumbled as he pointed; and Hilde looked with all her eyes.

"Then, the fellows—six, or more of them—there by the tree where the red and the blue lanterns gleam," Karl went on, growing easier of speech as he grew more indignant. "Have you seen them before? I trow not—with their black, snapping eyes and their black brows, grown together across the nose. See how they keep laughing among themselves. Now, one chooses a village maid; and the other—by my forge and its flame!—he is making for one of the Nixies, and that the fairest of them all. They, too,

are Witch Folk, Hilde; every one of them; rovers, that go up and down the land making mischief, playing pranks, and never helping the peasant at his work. They belong to the Goblin Hordes and to the band which calls itself the Kobold Crowd of the Western Hills: a greatly wicked clan. You must beware of them."

Hilde gasped, falling weakly against her companion.

"Have you heard of them?" he asked in surprise.

She nodded, speechless.

"You must have nothing to do with them," smith Karl repeated solemnly. "They are a greatly wicked clan."

But Hilde's anger was back again, mightier than ever. She straightened herself, and her fingers clenched themselves.

"And you," she cried,—the big man jumped at the tone,—"you, how come *you* to know so much more about Witch Folk than others know? How come *you* to warn me against all these people?" throwing out a hand towards the dancers. "You need not grow red, and stand on one foot! Do you think I did not hear you—this morning it was—when Master Klaus called the Burschen to give them their wage, that they might have something to spend in the village to-night if it was their wish—and you, instead of taking the coins, what did you do but wait about until the lads were gone, bring back the coins, and beg that you might have in their stead the sword, the old, rusty sword,

that hangs on a nail in the garret! You warn *me* against Witch Folk! How about your own black eyes and your brows that join?"

Hilde stamped her foot.

"The master may shut his eyes and pretend he does not know what it means when the smith begs a sword for his wage; but Mistress Gertrud shall hear of this, I promise you. *She* will have none such as you a-working with the Nickolaner when once she knows your kind; I can tell you that."

Smith Karl looked down at the storming maid, and straightened his shoulders.

"What if I *am* one of the Witch Folk?" he said quietly, when she at last paused for breath. "I am not of the tribe who harm peasants. I harm no one—unless he should be harmed for his evil doings."

"I will throw your old sword into the Arn!" cried Hilde, shaking a small fist up towards the burly face.

"That you will not do," he said decidedly.

"It shall be done to-morrow," stormed the angry one. "No; to-night! It shall lie deep in the Arn; and your friends, the Nixies, can play with it."

Now, it was over with Karl's goodnature.

"That sword you will let be," he ordered sternly. "It is not for you to say where it goes, or who shall play with it. You shall not, I say! Do you hear?" and he shook her by the arm.

But he started back with a cry of pain, and clutched the hand that had seized her so roughly.

"Who are you?" he gasped, bending down to stare into her face and holding his hand fiercely the while.

The girl's eyes dropped; her anger seemed to have gone, for there was a little smile about her lips as she answered, "Hilde, the servingmaid."

However, her meekness did not last.

"You answer me," she commanded. "You answer: why are you working here for that sword?"

"I am *not* working for the sword!" Karl cried hotly. "I but asked for the sword since it is a custom with us: we have no use for round pieces of copper and silver. I stay because Wittig stays; and so long as he is at the Nickolaner Hof, I, too, shall be there, whether I work, or no."

"Why?" frowned Hilde.

"He is a Waterman, Wittig is. You peasant people would know it but to look at him, but that you are all blind. It is his wish to bear the Mistress Gertrud away; down, down the Arn and into the sea, where, the Nixies say, he has a palace that is of all places the most beautiful. He would have her for the queen of that palace. Had it not been for me—and my forge," Karl added grimly, "he would have done it long ago."

"And why should he not bear her away?" snapped Hilde. "I trow it would be a great thing to be lady to so fine a lord, even if his home is among the waves instead of the woods."

The smith shook his head.

"The water world is no place for her," he said gravely. "She belongs to the fields and the sunshine——"

"That is not your reason," Hilde broke in. "You want her yourself!"

"No, little hothead, that I do not," and he looked down ruefully at his smarting hand. "There is another one of her own kind, who had much better have her. Also," he straightened himself with dignity, "we do not wed with the peasant maids of the Valleylands, we Bergschmieds——"

"So-o," drawled Hilde.

She thrust her hands in her apron pockets, put her head on one side, and looked him up and down.

"You are a Bergschmied, a smith of the mountains! That is indeed good to know. I have heard of your clan. You live off yonder in a place called the Western Hills, whatever that may be; you drag the rocks from their places in the earth to make you smithies in the holes they leave; and your forges gleam red both day and night, for your work is never ended. You are great men and strong; but you like no strange folk, whether they come from the Western Hills and are of an Elf-clan, even as you yourselves, or whether they are mortal men of the Valleylands. And your master, the lord who rules over you, is called—King Goldemar."

"How come you to know that?" Karl asked, suspiciously.

"I have been told," was the quick answer.

"Yes, you have been told," echoed Karl.

He pulled at his hair and waved his arms, as though he would have taken hammers to beat his trouble to pieces.

"I might have guessed. The Yokel of Bauer Gregor's is overmuch at our Hof, despite the fact that he is said to come at his master's bidding. Hilde, Hilde, what can I say to you? I would guard you from all harm — why, I cannot tell, though I have wondered. It is as though a great disgrace would come to me, if any harm should come to you."

He spoke almost tenderly, and the big voice trembled.

"You must beware of Master Gregor's Yokel. I trust him not. He is not what he says he is. He is no peasant's servinglad."

"And what," Hilde asked coolly, "has that to do with the stranger yonder who made the music? Why was I taken away when I was but quietly talking to him? See, how he is looking about through the crowd. Perhaps he is looking for me. I think I will go back to him: he is a man of wonders."

"Little Hilde!"

The big smith laid his hand timidly on the girl's arm, and this time there was no cry of pain and he did not draw it away again.

"Little Hilde," he begged, "will you listen to me until I have done? It is not an easy work to speak, and I do it but badly; yet will you have patience to

the end? Then, if it is still your wish, then go back over yonder and do what you will."

Hilde sat down.

Karl rubbed his hand across his forehead, began, stopped, and tried again. It seemed as though words could not come. Then, he started a third time, hurriedly.

"That man over yonder — what his true name is I do not know, and the Fairy Folk do not know, nor the men in the Valleys. None know where he comes from, nor where he goes. He has a great power; and he wanders up and down the lands of men; and he comes also in the Fairie countries, but not often, for there is no love in the hearts of the Fairy Folk for him. His power is so great that he can make all people do what he will; but not the Elf-clans—if once they know him and what he tries to do. He can make people give whatever he asks for and do his every wish; and, worse than that, he can make them follow after him to the ends of the earth, whether they will or no. And often as he goes up and down through the countryside, he casts his eye on children, and they run after him as he goes from town to town, away, away; and they never come back again. And the lads and the lasses, many of the lasses, must up and follow him out of the house of their home and the street of their childhood and away over the hills. And they are never seen again. Some say that he is a great king in a far-away country; but his kingdom is not in the Valleylands, and it is not in the Western Hills; for many have gone behind, spying

upon him to see where he and all his followers go, yet none have been able to learn. So we have come to think that the Strange Player——"

Hilde gasped and pointed over towards the fiddler stand.

"That, that," she stammered—"is *he* the Strange Player?"

"Yes," said Karl in a weary voice.

"How do you know all this?" Hilde asked in a hushed voice.

And smith Karl answered simply: "Many of the Fairy Folk have been sent from many fairy kingdoms to see if they could track him to his home. They were of the quickest and the brightest, but they were never quick enough for him. Then it was thought that some slower, more stupid, would be better fitted for the task, since the Player would not be on his guard against them; and so among others who should go and live in the Valleyland and see what they could do, I was sent by King Goldemar——"

"I never heard that!" gasped Hilde.

"No; how should you? You see it is this way." The smith's big, earnest voice grew more earnest yet. "He is not of the Folk of the Western Hills, the Strange Player is not: and we Elf-clans hate him, it may be even more than you people in the Valleylands. He is a most evil man; and his power grows from year to year, because with every year he learns more of the Albleyk."

Hilde shivered as she sat beside the smith in the dark, listening.

"What is the Albleyk?" she whispered.

"I cannot tell for I do not know," Karl answered helplessly. "And I do not know who it is that may know. But this much I know, that it is a wondersong; that it has spells to draw all men and beasts and birds, and the Fairy Folk of land and sea; that it has within it many a melody, melodies countless in number. Each folk that lives owns as its greatest treasure some melody of the Albleyk, and plays it and loves it and guards it, men and Elves alike; and he, the Strange Player, he steals them from men as he goes through their land at night; from the birds he has stolen them, and from the Folk in the Western Hills. And that is why we have spies to follow him, and why some day—not yet, for the kings have not found his home and cannot kill him until they can free the people and the treasure he has robbed from the earth, but some day—all the kingdoms of the Western Hills will band together against him and he will pay for the mischief he has wrought."

There was a pause. The smith seemed puzzling over something. Hilde's eyes began to flash in the dark.

"There is one thing I cannot understand," Karl went on slowly, staring through the trees on to the village green, where it looked as though the dancing and the laughter would never come to an end; "whether he of himself is so powerful, or whether he is strong

only because of his wonder treasures. That I do not know, and the reason I wonder is because he has lost his fiddle."

Hilde echoed the words.

"Yes," smith Karl repeated; "wherever he went and whatever he did, he carried with him a fiddle, little and mean and old; whenever there was a mischief to do, first he played upon that fiddle, and then none had the power to gainsay him. Now, he has lost it; and since that time he has been as one gone mad—running, hiding, begging from village to village; asking, searching up and down the valleys of the Arn, for it was in these valleys he lost it; doing as though he cared never to hear of it, as though it were a thing of no use; yet mad, mad to find it again. Now, what can there be in that little, old fiddle? It has been no help to the one who stole it from him while he slept in the willow wood by the Arn."

"Who stole it?" breathed Hilde.

"Wittig."

"Wittig! Wittig!" the girl echoed, as though she could not have heard aright. "Wittig, here at the Hof?"

"Yes. Wittig, the Waterman, who works with the Nickolaner. He knows the Strange Player of old——"

"That I should hit thus in the dark," Hilde muttered to herself; but the Bergschmied did not hear.

"And when the Strange Player came through the land this spring, playing his wild, wild tunes, Wittig

feared the Mistress Gertrud would be made to follow; and he stole the fiddle, Wittig did, while the Player slept in the willows—I saw him—and made away with it up the Arn towards the Hills. He was gone many days; he came back without it, very angry. It is in my mind he thought he would learn to play upon it, and so make the Mistress Gertrud follow him. What he did with it I do not know; but the next evening he tried to carry her away into the Arn. That was when you from the bank saw her struggling in the water and drew her back to land. It was well done, that deed, Hilde—you are strong for a maid—and Master Klaus did well to take you to hire into his household for his thanks: but you did more than you and he and Mistress Gertrud dream of; for it was Wittig and a choice lot of his water cronies were pushing her into the stream and making ready to bear her off forever. You could not know that; how should you, when they can make themselves disappear at will from the eyes of mortal people? But it was he, the Waterman. He was prettily angry that you should have stopped him. He grew angrier yet before the night was through, for I burnt him soundly at the forge, and promised him greater burning still if he let not the girl be. Since then, until to-night, he has had to content himself with singing to her. To-night, he saw the Strange Player back again, and again he feared the man would bewitch the maids with his airs; so he must needs pick her up and bear her off a second time. She had fainted when

I came up with them. He has again tasted the forge fire, and so the matter rests."

Karl rose from the ground.

"Now we will go back to the Hof," he said.

"Yes," said Hilde, standing up beside him, "now we will go back to the Hof."

She hummed a strange tune, and glanced back at the green, where at last there seemed to be signs of the merrymaking's breaking up.

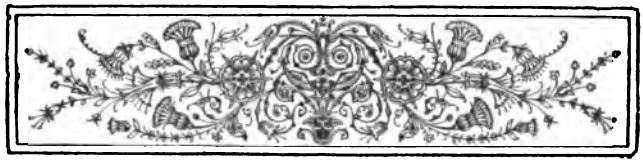
"We will go back to the Hof," she repeated, "but I wish to hear more of the Albleyk."

"I have told you all I know," smith Karl said with a great sigh.

The talking had been hard for him, and he was very tired.

"The Albleyk is not for such as I: the song of the mountain smiths is all the song I can sing; and at times I forget half of that, even. It is said that the Nixies know more of the Albleyk melodies than anyone of the earth; they and Fossegrim, who guards the waterfalls. The Nixies are an evil people: they will have done much mischief here to-night. See that you never have to do with them;" and the two started back to the Nickolaner Hof.

But little maid Hilde of the bright, black eyes, did she go within when the big smith left her at Klaus Nickol's door; or did she slip away again into the night, away towards the narrow strip of woodland that led down to the Arn?



V

RUDROON'S DOINGS.

THE next day all things went wrong at the Nickolaner Hof. Wittig's scowl was larger than ever; and he carried on his wrist a great scar. Karl shut himself up in the smithy, made the forge to roar mightily, and did not even come to his meals. The Mistress Gertrud looked as though she had been crying all the night; she scolded the maids and would speak with no one. There was no singing when the waggons came tilting home; the lads yawned at their work and overslept at the noon hour; and the Bauer Nickol swore that never again should hireling of his go out to a village dance before the last sheaf had been brought home for its wintering and the song of "Harvest Over" sung in the grainfields. Even Hilde, the brightest and quickest of the household, seemed to have left her wits behind on the village green; for she spilt the milk on the kitchen floor, and when sent to the dairy for more, forgot to come back. A second maid who was sent after found her in the sheepfold among the lambs.

It was a graceless day, and evening brought no peace; for dusk had scarcely settled before a serving-maid came shrieking down the stairs, saying she heard unearthly sounds in the garret; and not five minutes after she had been quieted and sent back to sleep, Bauer Nickol, on coming round the house, found Wittig on the ground among the gardenbeds with a strange man planted atop of him. Both were talking a wild tongue with loud voices; and they had one another by the hair.

Bauer Nickol was in no humour to listen to explanations and askings of pardon. He loved his posies, and he had had a trying day; and he thundered a thousand thunderweathers down upon them, as he hoisted them onto their feet, one with each hand.

"Talk not to me of fiddles! I want no fiddles! You shall sell me no fiddle!" and his great voice filled the evening air. "And if I had a fiddle, I would break it on your thick head! Can your peddler eyes not see the walk that you must come trampling on my sweet flowers with your great cow feet? And you, stupid,"—this to Wittig, whom he gave an extra shake,—"how come you to be rolling here on the ground? Ach! You say he has stolen your fiddle, stranger? Potz tausand! It is past belief! Yet that gives you no right to walk upon my verbenas and the poppies. No: I will have no more words. You can settle between yourselves elsewhere; but you, Wittig, you can go. You have had your wage money, and I

can do without you. I like not your sulky looks : the past week, for all the work you have done, you have been unbearable. And I will have no thieves among the Nickolaner. No more words here ! Marsch ! Out ! You can settle on the highway, or in the wood yonder. Fiddles ? We have not your fiddle, man. If Wittig stole your fiddle, talk to him. We grow no fiddles on these lands, we grow grain;" and out the two went, for all the stranger cried that he had heard someone a-playing on his fiddle not five minutes before in the house there.

But what was that that was being carried out of the backdoor under a blackeyed servingmaid's apron, while Bauer Nickol and the stranger were protesting among the flowerbeds at the front of the house ?

Hilde tumbled off the stoop and into Yokel's arms, was seized, whirled through the deserted barnyards— the men were already asleep after their two days' work and one night's dancing — and landed by the farthest shed of the sheepfolds.

Then Yokel spoke.

" Are you mad to play where you can be heard ? What of the promise you gave me ? What—— "

" By my plume ! I forgot," was the unabashed retort. " I have hidden that promise. There was a melody, and I feared I would lose it from my mind. I could not wait. Do you come at Master Gregor's bidding ? "

" Not I. He swears he will have nothing more to

do with the Nickolaner maid, and has gone singing songs under someone's window adown the valley. Helder, we must be off at once: it is no longer safe to stay."

"To-morrow; not to-night. What I have longed for comes at last! To-night——"

"What I have feared for comes at last," interrupted Bauer Gregor's servingman angrily. "First you drive others mad with your playing: now you have gone mad yourself. Where are your eyes? Can you not see? The Kobolds fairly swarm in the valley. Do you know with whom you danced last night on the green? *Kaldah!* Kaldah, who gave you your cursed fiddle that has changed you so. I swear he knew you, maid's clothes, or no; for I saw great laughter in his eye as he put his arm about you. You know what it means if we are caught! Are you so eager to meet King Goldemar's anger? Come away, I say!"

"I cannot go. I cannot; even if staying meant the worst that can happen to anyone. Oh, Rudroon, that you do not understand! It is surely safe for one night more. Such a few hours! I must stay; for to-night I go learn of Fossegrim——"

"And who is Fossegrim?"

"He is a Waterman who lives down yonder in the Arn. Karl first told me of him: Karl is a Bergschmied, Rudroon; of the clan we used to watch at their forges when we went by the mountain smithies at Rallying time — he has warned me against everything

in the sky and on the earth and under the waves; he says also that you are most evil and I must beware of you. That must have been because of the kissing; but where there is the pleasure of kissing one's brother I cannot see."

The one who was called Hilde the servingmaid shrugged a pair of slim shoulders.

"If you think I enjoyed it so greatly, you are much mistaken," snapped the other. "I did it in sport to match the clothes you wear: else where was the excuse for my coming here so often? Now, what of this Fossegrim?"

"Smith Karl said that the Nixies and Fossegrim know more Albleyk melodies than any other folk."

"Your precious Albleyk melodies!" muttered the lad whom the Valley People called Yokel.

"So after Karl left me I slipt from the house and over the meadows, and made for the willows down by the Arn. The Nixies were hurrying home from the dance — my cap, but they are a fair lot! Wonderful! They move like a mist through the trees; their voices are birds singing at dawn! Their laughter! Their laughter is the sound of brooks in the Western Hills——"

"What did you *do*, boy?" cried Bauer Gregor's Bursche. "The brooks of the Western Hills roar like any beast gone mad. What did you *do*?"

"I followed," was the sulky answer, "and I heard their talk. Rudroon, if you break in again, I tell you

no more : as it is, I must be off when the moon swings free of the poplar trees. They said, the Nixies did, that Fossegrim was angry, because of late no Valleymen, or maids have come to listen to his playing ; that the Valley People no longer come begging to learn his melodies, or bring him a black lamb, or a white kid, as offering. So, the Nixies said, they must hurry back, else his fury at them would pass all bounds, and he would not let them leave the stream for months, maybe. I hear the words. I think to myself. I follow. I see them slip to the water's edge. I hear a roar like a torrent between hills, and a fellow sticks a grisly head from out the waves, and tells the Nixies what is his thought of them, their doings, and the sheepshead village lads with whom they dance. Then the Water maidens dipped into the Arn, and I came home. Rudroon," the story-teller continued impressively, " I have out in the hazel clump at the end of the early wheatfield a white kid and black lambs half a dozen—we can repay the Bauer Nickol later—and now I go to old Fossegrim, offer the flock, say it has been the longing of my life to see him — my Kobold lantern, but he is ugly past belief — to hear his playing, and be taught his melodies on the fiddle which I bring. If it is in your mind, you may come so far as the first willows and poke the kid from behind—it is an unruly animal; after that you may go back to Master Gregor's or any other place you may wish ; for from there I and my flock go on alone."

But it was not in the servinglad's mind to follow on behind and poke the unruly animal, and he said so. He gave the departing one his blessing; then, suddenly, darted after as the costume of the Nickolaner servingmaid was about to whisk around the corner, and begged in the old-time words, which were always followed by such laughter, " Hilde, one kiss ; to please me ! "

With a half shriek the servingmaid ran on around the shed and out of sight ; but when the lad would have followed, stern hands were laid upon him and shook him to and fro, and a voice not at all pleasant to hear growled in his ear, " We have now had enough of your pranks, my slim friend. Those little doings of yours you can let prettily be," and big Karl added another shake, or two by way of finishing.

With a quick twist the lad wrenched himself free, and, whirling around, stood straight and slim and very angry before the angry smith.

" What are you doing ? And who think you I am ? " he demanded haughtily.

" I know well enough who you are," Karl flamed forth. " Do you think I have no eyes in my head, or that I come from the Mountain of Fools ! Light heels, bright eyes, and a ready tongue! You let the Nickolaner servingmaid be, my friend of the Western Hills, or——"

" Or what ? " jeered the boy. " I shall do as I please with maid Hilde, and you can go tend your forge fire. Or what, stupid ? "

Again Karl laid his big hand on the boy's shoulder; but he had not begun the shaking which he had in his mind to give before there was a cry of pain; his arms dropped, and he stared into the scowling face before him.

"Who are you?" he asked; and a trembling went through his large frame.

"Who am I?" stormed the boy. "Where are your wits, man, that you lay hands on me? Who am I? I will show you who I am," and he tore open the peasant's vest that hung loosely on his slim body. "There! Do you know *that*, you who come once a year to kneel at King Goldemar's throne and swear fealty to him and his Princes? Do you know the three thrice royal Ruby Clasps when you see them, or shall I take off this belt of mine, which holds the jewel, that you may see and feel its strength the better? Who am I? Who but King Goldemar's sons wear the Royal Clasps on the Belt of the Town of Fairie? Touch me again, and its strength shall lay you flat!"

But the Bergschmied had already dropped to his knee before the sign of royalty that blazed there on the youngster's breast — it is an impossible thing for any but a royal Fairy to wear the royal clasp: should another try to put it on, the strength of the clasp would kill him; and this Karl as well as the Prince knew, so there could be no doubt but that the boy spoke true — and, though there was no fear in his eyes as he looked up at the angry stripling, there was a great

reverence. He placed his cap on the ground, and bent his head.

"My lord Prince," he said, "pardon for my waywardness; and pardon yet again—I ask no questions, questions are not for me—yet let me say——"

"Well, say on, man," ordered the Prince, impatiently tapping the ground with his foot, "and stop the stammering."

"It is but this—" still the Bergschmied hesitated. "You are Prince Royal to the largest kingdom in the Western Hills. What brings you here is no affair of mine. Yet I would beg—are there not enough and to spare in the Fairie countries? When you go back to your Palace, it would surely be best that there were none to grieve in the Valleylands."

The Prince looked puzzled.

"It is not for the royal son of King Goldemar to make sport of peasant servingmaids; and little Hilde——"

A merry laugh interrupted the halting speech.

"'Little Hilde!' Get up, thick head, and put on your cap. I make no sport of peasant servingmaids, and of little Hilde least of all. Get up, I say, and cover your stupid head! 'Little Hilde!' The eyes you have, Bergschmied! You warned Hilde against me; a pretty deed, in truth—Hilde is son to King Goldemar the same as I. The servingmaid of the Nickolaner Hof is my royal twin, Prince Helder, of the Town of Fairie."

It was an easy thing to say, and the laughter that went along with the words bubbled out and away as though it would never stop; but it was not so easy to make this state of affairs plain to the bewildered smith, who kept gaping and gasping and holding to the shed-door with one hand and waving the other about him, asking questions as he would have done of a peasant lad, and begging pardon for his unruly tongue, as he was wont to do when spoken to by the great people of the Western Hills.

But Rudroon was very unconcerned. He who not a half hour before had begged the royal Prince Helder to make off with him, and that at once so that none should know them, or be able to track them, he now perched himself on the low wall, stretched himself full length on the rough stones, and began to recount his and the Prince Helder's adventures to the amazed smith.

"My royal twin will yet be the death of me," he declared. "The life he has led me these months past! Listen till I tell you."

Karl clasped his hands and threw in cries of wonder; the Prince waved his heels in the air and chewed bits of Klaus Nickol's straw as he talked. If any harm came of the talking, let Helder look to it: he should not have gone off, he and his flock, to the willows on the banks of the Arn.

They had left the Town of Fairie and the Palace with its stolid company of guards sleeping in the sunshine,

Rudroon and Helder had, and had made their way to the east, over hills and mountain meadows, down, down towards the Valleylands. It was a fair country, but silent, stupid ; no folk and but few houses. Everyone seemed to have gone west to the Spring Rallying. They entered the homes and walked about ; but there was not much to see. It was not what they thought it would be; not so wondrous as when, passing by in a company of Palace Folk, they looked in at the open doors and were told it would not be seemly for the Princes Royal to alight. After days, how many they did not know or care—who were they to mark the days as they passed, two quiet lads gone a-wandering ? and Rudroon told how they had borrowed the brown garb of the Kobold Crowd from the Street of the Cap and Plume before leaving the Town of Fairie : they did not wish to draw notice on their travels, and in the Palace gardens even the birds stared at their bright attire—after days had gone, the hills sank away behind them and the joy of life began.

Rudroon wriggled happily as he lay on the wall and told the smith about it.

They saw the Valleylands of the earth spread out at their feet. They saw shepherds tending their flocks on the slopes ; they saw hunters and charcoal-burners and all manner of strange people who, they had since learned, were not given to mixing with their kin in the world below. They scoured the country; they peeped in at the windows of the hillside cotes, scaring the

cottagers; sometimes in the woods they came upon little children picking flowers, or berries, and the children shrieked and fled at the sight of them, or stood, ankle-deep in the brooks, staring until the Princes slipped away through the copses.

At last, the sight of the strange houses and the strange people who lived in them grew to be an old tale, and they wished to talk with these folk who were kin to them and their mother before them. So, one nightfall, happening upon people grouped about a fire and a pot in the twilight, they made their way past tents which stood pitched about, and asked to eat: and so they came to live with the Gypsy tribe.

Oh, the life they led; the wonders they learned; the merry time it was! The crazy talk at night about the Witch Folk, of whom they knew nothing,—not even that the Witch Folk and the Elves are not one and the same clan!—yet to whom they said they were bound in bonds of secret friendship and daring. Rudroon sighed at the memory of it.

"Belike we had been with them yet," he said, "for there has been no greater joy than that; but there was an old man—they called him the Father of the Ages. They said he was the wisest of the living. It may be, I know not; and yet it can easily be true, for the mortals seem but sour friends with wisdom. At times he told tales, better tales than any I have heard in the Western Hills; but one night he begins a witless story of the Albleyk and its melodies; and he

brings out a fiddle and plays a senseless tune. Then the merry time was done; for Helder goes mad with joy at the listening and comes a-carrying out the fiddle that *he* has,—a fiddle given him the day we left the Town of Fairie, small and nothing to look; yet he treasures it along with his Belt and his Ruby Clasp. All the while we were leading the gay racing life of Fairy Folk in the lands of men he needs must play upon it. All things that he heard he would play—the wind in the trees he echoed, and the brook as it lipped the shore; the whisper of reeds in upland pools, and the song of the meadow-grass. The birds came to listen, and strange, large beasts, not seen before, or since. Day and night he played: wonder is I have not lost my mind of it. So he brings out his fiddle which he has kept hidden in his royal blouse; for when we came among the Gypsies, he lost thought of it, the days were so new and wonderful. He brings his fiddle; the old man twangs the strings, and goes mad as Helder is. He will give Helder another fiddle, that the lad can better learn to play, and he will keep Helder's old fiddle for himself. We had a wondrous time! There were words. There were blows. Had it not been for the Belts and the Ruby Clasps, I doubt we had done more wandering. Before the night was done the Gypsy camp looked as though the storm had walked through it. Then we came away on down into the Valleys; and all the while Helder talked of nothing but Albleyk melodies and the learning of

them, and scraped his strings by night until those who heard the sound — even when we lay in the cornfields and the village slept half a mile away—would wake and up and follow. Amazing and most unpleasant! Then it comes to our minds to learn the life of the village people, and we hire ourselves out as stable-lads to a peasant in a valley over yonder."

Rudroon pointed vaguely across the land.

"But before we do this, I take the promise from Helder that he makes no more noises where there are ears to hear— I care for no peasants, gaping and following when one would be alone. So we work in the stables; but one night a granny of the household, who for the most part sits by the fire and does not speak two words of sense a week — it was raining and we were bidden to the hearth after nightfall — begins a-mumbling about the Strange Player who struck her with his fiddle bow. The peasants say she was the fairest maid of the village in her young years, but that one day she went into the woods and when she came back again she had left her wits behind. She begins a-babbling about the Strange Player and the Albleyk, and says that it takes a maid to know, and that, if they don't believe her, they can go on over the hills after him of the fiddle bow and learn for themselves. So what must Helder do but take as a gift from the peasant a maid's outfit of clothes. The peasant did not know it at the time, but has since learnt of it, I think it safe to say. He puts himself into the clothes;

and then away over the hill to meet this moonstruck fiddler and see for himself! And I a-trailing on behind, like to kill myself with laughter at the sight of him, and like to kill him for changing the sport of our life into a fool's freak.

"And the fiddle is his first thought as always.

"Then we come to the Arn valley, and he picks the mistress Gertrud out of the water and is taken to hire by Klaus Nickol; and here we are. To-night he has again gone mad, about the Strange Player and the Albleyk and one Fossegrim and the Nixies; has taken kids and lambs and I know not what all — his fiddle, that goes without saying — and has made off to the Arn. What he will do, the Nixies know; but to-morrow, to-morrow, Bergschmied mine, the maid's clothing shall be left behind, Helder will be Kobold Prince again, and we — and the fiddle — shall be far from here; that much I promise you. And so the tale ends."

Rudroon laughed, jumped from the wall, and stretched his arms; but the Bergschmied was not so merry as he picked himself from the ground and stared anxiously across the fields.

"My lord Prince," he said at last with a shake of his head, "the end of the tale is not yet. It is not a safe thing to deal with Fossegrim; his ways are ugly past thinking. I like this not. Stay where you are and be out of harm's way; I go across to the willow clump."

But he stopped to listen.

Tap! Tap! Tap! What was it that struck the ground and came bounding along through the moonlit night? Mortal ears could not have heard it; but Karl's body grew tense at the sound, and Rudroon caught his breath. Tap! Tap! Tap! The quickness was as that of the Kobold racing pace: no, faster even than the gait that left the air a-whirl in the wake of the Crowd. Tap! Tap! Tap! Nearer and nearer; around the corner, now, and——

"Loose your lantern, Prince, and show your belt!" cried the figure that dashed into sight. "Now is no time for a peasant's garb! On, over the meadow and across to the Arn, if you would have a live brother when morning comes!" and Kaldah, for it was he who spoke, leaped through a window into the sheepshed, and was out again and off before either Prince or smith could draw breath to question, or exclaim.

VI

FOSSEGRIM'S FIGHT.

RUDROON did not wait for more: he dashed after the flying Kobold. It seemed to him that he had never lived, never moved before. What a pace it was, the racing pace of the Crowd! How it put life and glow and the mad longing for fight into the pulsing veins!

> "The Street of the Cap and the Plume,
> Yoho!
> And the Fairy Folk who know it!
> Our one delight
> Is a whirling fight!
> Come, show it! Show it! Show it!"

Rudroon knew well enough what *that* meant. He had heard the words, the tune, sung on the Kobold doorsteps, hummed in the Palace gardens, chanted throughout the Western Hills in the spring season. But now, how new they sounded, how wild, how full! The meaning that lay within, the laughter, and the joy of the coming broil!

Again the words rose from that strip of woodland yonder, rang out over the meadows, and — yes! yes, surely, other bands of the Crowd were rushing to the help of those in the willow clump; for, free flung from the west, came the eager, rollicking answer:

"Swing up your flashing lamps,
Yoho!
To summon to the sally:
And give the merry Kobold cry
To rally! Rally! Rally!"

Red lights blinked and disappeared like glowworms against the background of the night; the tap! tap! of bounding feet, the whirr of cloaks grew as he neared the river; and groups of flying figures could be seen from all sides hurling themselves into the wood.

Rudroon tore off his peasant's vest; he flung up his lantern and shouted with the others; he burst into the willows and the thick of the fight, mad with the very madness that comes upon the Kobold Crowd, that makes them think and feel and act as one man, that makes them the strength and the danger of the Western Hills.

By Goldemar's golden towers, but they were slippery with a great and unthinkable slipperiness, were these Folk, Watermen and Nixies alike! How they twisted and turned and slid from under one's fingers and laid clammy, oozy hands about one's feet! How strong they were and how many! How their green

eyes gleamed and their teeth glistened in evil smiles! How sickening sweet was the scent of the wreaths they wore! The Kobolds were as children beside them. If this were fighting——

Then Rudroon heard a laugh close beside him.

"Use your belt *thus*, Prince," called out a jolly voice.

The voice was Puck's; and the world came right once more.

"Where 's Helder?" gasped the Prince, grasping his belt afresh.

Puck jerked his head backwards. He was dealing with a fierce-eyed Waterman, raining blows with his belt on the dripping shoulders, and had time to address his remarks to no one else.

"Get back to the Arn and nurse your green, weedy head," he now advised cheerfully; and, indeed, the Waterman took the Kobold advice. He tumbled back onto the bank, and a Nixie dragged him into the water.

Another of his clan slid forward to take his place.

"Where is Helder?" Rudroon panted again.

The new manner of wielding his belt was effective, and he was beginning to enjoy the work — if only his twin were safe.

"Behind — resting. He was taken unawares. He will be well before morning."

At that moment Helder's voice sounded beside them: one would scarcely have known it; it broke in anger.

"Give me the fiddle, I say!"

"You will never touch one of its strings again," was the jeering answer. "Not one! But you shall keep it company, you boy in maid's clothing! Kobold imp! Mistress Gertrud shall never go back to the Western Hills, for all you know the Albleyk melodies. Your fiddle! You shall keep it company in the bottom of the Arn!"

Rudroon saw Wittig dragging Helder towards the slimy shore. Puck gave a cry of dismay and dashed to the rescue. Helder had a gash on his forehead; his face looked white, and his eyes were wild.

"Give me the fiddle, I say!"

He raised his belt to strike, but his hand was seized from behind, and a new voice shrieked out: "That fiddle is *mine*, you thief! Give it to *me!* Your dearest wish, Waterman, if you get me the fiddle back again!"

"Ah, the Strange Player takes a hand," murmured Rudroon.

He had worked his way to his brother's side, caught Helder in one arm as the lad fell, and with the other drove his belt across the dark man's face. Puck was engaging Wittig at close quarters. But the Strange Player wrenched Helder's belt from his halfclosed hand; it dropped to the ground; and Wittig, dodging in behind Puck, flung himself upon it with a howl of delight.

"Now, it is over with your strength, you trickster,"

he choked. "Now we meet, matched alike!" and he shook the belt high in the air.

There was one cry of anger when the Kobold Crowd saw the Royal Ruby Clasp in the hands of the foe. As one man they surged forward to save it. But someone else was before them. As Wittig raised his arm to hurl the treasure into the stream, he was grasped and lifted from his feet; his arms were pinned to his sides, and smith Karl, panting from the haste he had been making, roared into the din: "Back into the Arn, every greenbacked one of you: and think not, you webfooted lot, to deal with the Folk who live upon the land!"

He tore the belt from Wittig's grasp, struck the Waterman, and pitched him bodily into the Arn.

"Back, I say! I have that in my hand that will brand every fishfinned one of you, as long as you all shall live; and you shall feel it, Watermen and white-armed Nixies alike, who dance and bring sorrow into villages."

He whirled his redhot stave to right and left among them, and wherever he went, the Water Folk fell away shrieking, and made for the oozy riverbanks. Old Fossegrim, scalyarmed and grislyheaded, fought on alone; but, at last, he, too, plunged into the roar of the waves, and rose up again to shake his fist at the panting throng on the shore.

"Think not that you have seen the last of us," he bellowed. "We of the wave and the waterfall and the

It was a graceless day, and evening brought no peace; for dusk had scarcely settled before a serving-maid came shrieking down the stairs, saying she heard unearthly sounds in the garret; and not five minutes after she had been quieted and sent back to sleep, Bauer Nickol, on coming round the house, found Wittig on the ground among the gardenbeds with a strange man planted atop of him. Both were talking a wild tongue with loud voices; and they had one another by the hair.

Bauer Nickol was in no humour to listen to explanations and askings of pardon. He loved his posies, and he had had a trying day; and he thundered a thousand thunderweathers down upon them, as he hoisted them onto their feet, one with each hand.

"Talk not to me of fiddles! I want no fiddles! You shall sell me no fiddle!" and his great voice filled the evening air. "And if I had a fiddle, I would break it on your thick head! Can your peddler eyes not see the walk that you must come trampling on my sweet flowers with your great cow feet? And you, stupid,"—this to Wittig, whom he gave an extra shake,—"how come you to be rolling here on the ground? Ach! You say he has stolen your fiddle, stranger? Potz tausand! It is past belief! Yet that gives you no right to walk upon my verbenas and the poppies. No: I will have no more words. You can settle between yourselves elsewhere; but you, Wittig, you can go. You have had your wage money, and I

can do without you. I like not your sulky looks: the past week, for all the work you have done, you have been unbearable. And I will have no thieves among the Nickolaner. No more words here! Marsch! Out! You can settle on the highway, or in the wood yonder. Fiddles? We have not your fiddle, man. If Wittig stole your fiddle, talk to him. We grow no fiddles on these lands, we grow grain;" and out the two went, for all the stranger cried that he had heard someone a-playing on his fiddle not five minutes before in the house there.

But what was that that was being carried out of the backdoor under a blackeyed servingmaid's apron, while Bauer Nickol and the stranger were protesting among the flowerbeds at the front of the house?

Hilde tumbled off the stoop and into Yokel's arms, was seized, whirled through the deserted barnyards—the men were already asleep after their two days' work and one night's dancing—and landed by the farthest shed of the sheepfolds.

Then Yokel spoke.

"Are you mad to play where you can be heard? What of the promise you gave me? What——"

"By my plume! I forgot," was the unabashed retort. "I have hidden that promise. There was a melody, and I feared I would lose it from my mind. I could not wait. Do you come at Master Gregor's bidding?"

"Not I. He swears he will have nothing more to

The smith looked doubtful.

"They could do much," he muttered. Then he shook his head. "You must go back with them at once," he decided. "Here it is not safe."

Kaldah came leaping back across the fields, brandishing the fiddle in one hand and the bow in the other; and his twenty Kobolds came capering behind him. Puck seized it and thrust it into Helder's hands.

"Now, my lord Prince, come!" he urged.

But my lord Prince did not move. My lord Prince tucked the fiddle under his arm, straightened his princely self, and tapped the Ruby Clasp approvingly. He felt well again.

"We are not going to start for the Western Hills tonight," he said. "We are going back to Bauer Nickol's house and Hof, and see to it that the Water Folk do him no harm."

Puck protested. What would the Queen say? What would the King do? Did Prince Helder not know, did not Prince Rudroon know, that the Town of Fairie was stormstruck on their account? Did they not know that the Kobolds had been sent out over all the earth to hunt for them? Had they not heard how Goldemar and his Queen after the Spring Rallying had gone on a-visiting in the land of the royal Elf Laurin, and on coming home months later than their wont, were told by the guards that Grammarius had gone off long before, saying that he had been bidden by King Goldemar to follow to the Rally-

ing, he and the royal twins alone? Were they not told that Grammarius had not been seen or heard of since, and that the Queen, when she learnt that her sons were lost, was like to die of sorrow? Did not——

But Helder stamped his foot in the midst of the speech.

"We are going back, I say! Come, Rudroon; come, Karl. If you are afraid to follow, you of the Crowd, stay where you are!"

The Crowd followed. No; the Crowd dashed ahead to the Bauernhof, while Karl tramped stolidly through the stubble, his hand on Prince Helder's shoulder, and Puck and Kaldah and Rudroon fidgeted on either side of the two.

"How came this broil to start?" the smith asked tenderly; and Helder scowled, and hugged his fiddle, and touched the strings with his finger.

"It was Wittig and the Strange Player," he said shortly. "All would have gone well had it not been for them. I offered my kid and the lambs at the bank; I spoke of my great wish, and begged that Fossegrim show himself. He came and sat on the shore and sang and played on a shell, and at last, when I asked, showed me on the fiddle how the tune went, pressing my fingers over the strings till the blood was like to spurt from my hand, so hard he pressed. Then Wittig came rolling down the bank and after him the Strange Player still gasping about his fiddle. Wittig called on his water friends to help him; but, as he called, he

no more: as it is, I must be off when the moon swings free of the poplar trees. They said, the Nixies did, that Fossegrim was angry, because of late no Valleymen, or maids have come to listen to his playing; that the Valley People no longer come begging to learn his melodies, or bring him a black lamb, or a white kid, as offering. So, the Nixies said, they must hurry back, else his fury at them would pass all bounds, and he would not let them leave the stream for months, maybe. I hear the words. I think to myself. I follow. I see them slip to the water's edge. I hear a roar like a torrent between hills, and a fellow sticks a grisly head from out the waves, and tells the Nixies what is his thought of them, their doings, and the sheepshead village lads with whom they dance. Then the Water maidens dipped into the Arn, and I came home. Rudroon," the story-teller continued impressively, "I have out in the hazel clump at the end of the early wheatfield a white kid and black lambs half a dozen—we can repay the Bauer Nickol later—and now I go to old Fossegrim, offer the flock, say it has been the longing of my life to see him — my Kobold lantern, but he is ugly past belief — to hear his playing, and be taught his melodies on the fiddle which I bring. If it is in your mind, you may come so far as the first willows and poke the kid from behind—it is an unruly animal; after that you may go back to Master Gregor's or any other place you may wish; for from there I and my flock go on alone."

But it was not in the servinglad's mind to follow on behind and poke the unruly animal, and he said so. He gave the departing one his blessing; then, suddenly, darted after as the costume of the Nickolaner servingmaid was about to whisk around the corner, and begged in the old-time words, which were always followed by such laughter, " Hilde, one kiss ; to please me ! "

With a half shriek the servingmaid ran on around the shed and out of sight ; but when the lad would have followed, stern hands were laid upon him and shook him to and fro, and a voice not at all pleasant to hear growled in his ear, " We have now had enough of your pranks, my slim friend. Those little doings of yours you can let prettily be," and big Karl added another shake, or two by way of finishing.

With a quick twist the lad wrenched himself free, and, whirling around, stood straight and slim and very angry before the angry smith.

" What are you doing ? And who think you I am ? " he demanded haughtily.

" I know well enough who you are," Karl flamed forth. " Do you think I have no eyes in my head, or that I come from the Mountain of Fools ! Light heels, bright eyes, and a ready tongue! You let the Nickolaner servingmaid be, my friend of the Western Hills, or——"

" Or what ? " jeered the boy. " I shall do as I please with maid Hilde, and you can go tend your forge fire. Or what, stupid ? "

Again Karl laid his big hand on the boy's shoulder; but he had not begun the shaking which he had in his mind to give before there was a cry of pain; his arms dropped, and he stared into the scowling face before him.

"Who are you?" he asked; and a trembling went through his large frame.

"Who am I?" stormed the boy. "Where are your wits, man, that you lay hands on me? Who am I? I will show you who I am," and he tore open the peasant's vest that hung loosely on his slim body. "There! Do you know *that*, you who come once a year to kneel at King Goldemar's throne and swear fealty to him and his Princes? Do you know the three thrice royal Ruby Clasps when you see them, or shall I take off this belt of mine, which holds the jewel, that you may see and feel its strength the better? Who am I? Who but King Goldemar's sons wear the Royal Clasps on the Belt of the Town of Fairie? Touch me again, and its strength shall lay you flat!"

But the Bergschmied had already dropped to his knee before the sign of royalty that blazed there on the youngster's breast — it is an impossible thing for any but a royal Fairy to wear the royal clasp: should another try to put it on, the strength of the clasp would kill him; and this Karl as well as the Prince knew, so there could be no doubt but that the boy spoke true — and, though there was no fear in his eyes as he looked up at the angry stripling, there was a great

reverence. He placed his cap on the ground, and bent his head.

"My lord Prince," he said, "pardon for my waywardness; and pardon yet again—I ask no questions, questions are not for me—yet let me say——"

"Well, say on, man," ordered the Prince, impatiently tapping the ground with his foot, "and stop the stammering."

"It is but this—" still the Bergschmied hesitated. "You are Prince Royal to the largest kingdom in the Western Hills. What brings you here is no affair of mine. Yet I would beg—are there not enough and to spare in the Fairie countries? When you go back to your Palace, it would surely be best that there were none to grieve in the Valleylands."

The Prince looked puzzled.

"It is not for the royal son of King Goldemar to make sport of peasant servingmaids; and little Hilde——"

A merry laugh interrupted the halting speech.

"'Little Hilde!' Get up, thick head, and put on your cap. I make no sport of peasant servingmaids, and of little Hilde least of all. Get up, I say, and cover your stupid head! 'Little Hilde!' The eyes you have, Bergschmied! You warned Hilde against me; a pretty deed, in truth—Hilde is son to King Goldemar the same as I. The servingmaid of the Nickolaner Hof is my royal twin, Prince Helder, of the Town of Fairie."

It was an easy thing to say, and the laughter that went along with the words bubbled out and away as though it would never stop; but it was not so easy to make this state of affairs plain to the bewildered smith, who kept gaping and gasping and holding to the shed-door with one hand and waving the other about him, asking questions as he would have done of a peasant lad, and begging pardon for his unruly tongue, as he was wont to do when spoken to by the great people of the Western Hills.

But Rudroon was very unconcerned. He who not a half hour before had begged the royal Prince Helder to make off with him, and that at once so that none should know them, or be able to track them, he now perched himself on the low wall, stretched himself full length on the rough stones, and began to recount his and the Prince Helder's adventures to the amazed smith.

"My royal twin will yet be the death of me," he declared. "The life he has led me these months past! Listen till I tell you."

Karl clasped his hands and threw in cries of wonder; the Prince waved his heels in the air and chewed bits of Klaus Nickol's straw as he talked. If any harm came of the talking, let Helder look to it: he should not have gone off, he and his flock, to the willows on the banks of the Arn.

They had left the Town of Fairie and the Palace with its stolid company of guards sleeping in the sunshine,

Rudroon and Helder had, and had made their way to the east, over hills and mountain meadows, down, down towards the Valleylands. It was a fair country, but silent, stupid ; no folk and but few houses. Everyone seemed to have gone west to the Spring Rallying. They entered the homes and walked about ; but there was not much to see. It was not what they thought it would be; not so wondrous as when, passing by in a company of Palace Folk, they looked in at the open doors and were told it would not be seemly for the Princes Royal to alight. After days, how many they did not know or care—who were they to mark the days as they passed, two quiet lads gone a-wandering ? and Rudroon told how they had borrowed the brown garb of the Kobold Crowd from the Street of the Cap and Plume before leaving the Town of Fairie : they did not wish to draw notice on their travels, and in the Palace gardens even the birds stared at their bright attire—after days had gone, the hills sank away behind them and the joy of life began.

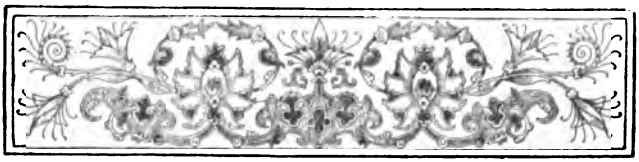
Rudroon wriggled happily as he lay on the wall and told the smith about it.

They saw the Valleylands of the earth spread out at their feet. They saw shepherds tending their flocks on the slopes ; they saw hunters and charcoal-burners and all manner of strange people who, they had since learned, were not given to mixing with their kin in the world below. They scoured the country; they peeped in at the windows of the hillside cotes, scaring the

stay and help with a ditch which they at once started to dig. A ditch? A gorge it was, and they made it in less time almost than it takes to tell the tale — the ferryman's tale took many minutes: indeed, he has to this day not finished the telling of it — a gorge, which they made to empty into an old quarry with underground passages that led no one knows where. When done with their digging, they opened it to the Arn, and the banked-up waters rushed into it with a great sound, and the flood went down. Then, they bade him ferry them back again, and left gold in his water-soaked house, and went away, laughing.

The villagers talk and wonder to this day, but they do not understand. How should they? They are thankful that the flood did no harm; no harm, except to Wittig, who was found later lying on Bauer Klaus's meadow. He had a great scar across his forehead, as though he had been branded with hot iron, and he was quite dead. They might think the doings all a dream; but there stands the great stone wall which the Witch Folk built in half a night on the Nickolaner acres.

Mistress Gertrud and Master Gregor call it their wedding gift.



IN THORN ROSE PALACE

I

THORN ROSE PALACE.

LONG, long ago, before Royal Goldemar was alive and before the Elves had come and made them homes in the Western Hills, a great and wonderful city stood on the spot where Fairie Town now stands, and beside it, a palace more great and wonderful than any that are now built. It was the palace where the little Princess called Thorn Rose lived, where she slept her hundred years' sleep, and was at last found and wakened by the Prince who married her. They all went away—the Princess and the Prince, the old King and Queen, and the people of the palace; for they found, when they once more passed out beyond the Rose Walls, that the busy city which had stood beside their home had fallen into ruins; the many people who had lived there had been frightened by the magic wall that sprang up around their ruler's dwelling, and had fled no one knew where.

So the palace people went with the Prince down the Valleylands to live ; but before they went, they had a mighty spell put upon the great Rose Thickets, so that none might cut them down, or pass through them to the palace beyond ; and the Wise Woman who placed that spell gave the little Thorn Princess a gift of a certain magic box which only those who knew its secret could open ; and in that box lay the True Token, and the True Token was the only thing that could make a way to open through the Rose Thickets.

They none of them ever saw the Thorn Palace again ; but later, when she had grown old, little Thorn Rose gave the palace to a son of hers ; and that son was the great-grandfather of King Goldemar.

None of the family ever lived in it, or went to see it ; but when Goldemar became an Elf Prince grown and took his flittings to the Valleylands and back again, he saw the cities of men and the ways of them, and he saw that this place was of all others the spot for elfin bands to sally from and to return to ; and after his fightings were over and he became King and great clans were his to command, it was here he built his Fairie Town. Here rose his glinting palace surrounded by wide gardens ; here were his broad streets ; and high walls rose up round about the whole, like the walls of towns in the lands of men. And guards stood on the walls and at the gates keeping watch.

But close beside Goldemar's Palace the Thorn Palace still rose, so close one corner of his gardens touched

on its Magic Thickets ; and the Thickets stretched on southwards and formed part of his town wall — what need of any other there, since it was more impassable than any stone which Goldemar's Folk could pile ? — and in memory of the people who had lived there in the olden days Goldemar let the ruins of the old city stand within his Town of Fairie, and their old-time entrance way, close to the Rose Thickets, became the Old South Gate of Fairie Town ; and the New South Gate — Goldemar's Gate — stood on the other side of the Town, nearer the east.

Rudroon and Helder had heard the tale of the Thorn Palace and of how its thorny wall came to be ; and they knew the spell that lay over it and the power of the True Token — though they did not know what the True Token was. How, then, did it chance that a path should open up before them through the Thickets when they brushed against it at play one morning while alone in Goldemar's garden — a tiny, twilight path with thorn boughs pushed back and intertwining overhead, pale roses bending towards them, and at the end a glimpse of tangled garden, a broken fountain, a marble stairway, and an angle of shimmering wall ?

The forsaken palace became their hidden playground, and no one ever knew of it ; for they were a wary couple and kept their secret well. They never tired of it, for it was always unclosing new wonders to them, making up to them in a small way their loss of the Valleylands.

Many changes had come into their life since they had been found by the Kobold Crowd and brought back to the Town of Fairie. They had expected angry words and deep dungeons on their return ; but not one word had been spoken, not one question asked. They had been told, instead, that each could have a guard of his own choosing, and that within stated times, after the learning was over, they could go with their guards for runnings in the Western Hills. Rudroon chose Puck and Puck's nearest allies ; Helder, Kaldah and "The Fiddlers," as they had come to be called, the twenty who had gone with Kaldah on the night of the fight with Fossegrim and brought the fiddle safe to their Prince's arms again.

The twins did not at all understand how this state of things had come to be for them ; but they rejoiced greatly — since the freedom of the Valleylands was lost to them these things were next best to take its place — and the Queen's white cheeks grew rosy at the sight of their happy faces.

II

THE HAZEL COPSES.

HELDER sat on the wall of the King's garden, down at the lower end, where the grounds were little kept. He liked this spot above all others; for here he and the fiddle had the place to themselves. Then, too, on the other side of the wall one could look down on the ruins of the "Old Town"; and, also, it was the surest way through the Magic Rose Thickets into the place beyond.

To-day, all through the bright hours of the afternoon, when the Folk move least and greatest quiet lies over Fairie Town, he and the fiddle had been playing soft tunes together — he would not play his Albleyk melodies aloud, so that anyone could hear and learn them — but now he had put the fiddle away and had come back idly to his spot on the wall. The afternoon was wearing, and the far-off coming of dusk made him restless. The day's learning was over and the sun's hours his to their end. What should he do?

Should he slip through the Thickets to the wonders beyond? Should he go to the Street of the Cap and

Plume? Kaldah and the Fiddlers would be angry because he had not come sooner, the more since Rudroon had gone off earlier in the day with Puck and his cronies and Helder had refused to take his guard and be of the company. Should he go now and make his peace with the Fiddlers, or——

A long-drawn note across the stillness of the afternoon.

The sounds of Fairie Town were many and to be heard at all times; but surely, this cry was different from others. It came with speed, and it spoke warning and danger.

Helder leaped to his feet and ran along the top of the wall. If he were not quick, a runner would suddenly bow before him with the command, "Prince Helder to the Queen!" That was always happening these days; and all that the Queen ever did was to smile and stroke his hair and let him go again.

So Helder jumped with his softest footfall down into the half-forgotten street of the Old Town, and ran along the grassgrown road that had been the highway to forgotten kings, down towards the Old South Gate to meet this wide-flung cry. On a turning, suddenly, he came upon a Moss Maid, wild-eyed and breathless, and making for the Palace.

"What is it?"

"The Witches have broken into the Copses," was the panting answer. "Let me by, Prince. I must to the King!" and she was gone.

"AND RAN ALONG THE GRASSGROWN ROAD."

For a moment Helder stood spellbound. Then, with one quick glance around, he darted in among the half-ruined dwellings to his right, threading his way in and out between them: a path few knew of or followed, the surest road — when one had no wish to be stopped halfway—to the Street of the Cap and Plume.

The Witches in the Hazel Copses! That would be a sight to see; that would be sport such as had not been since the days of the Valleylands; and if he were not swift to move, it was not for him! There was a lane leading along the back of the Kobolds' Street. By this lane one could reach Kaldah's house without being seen by all the open doors of the Crowd, and — yes! Helder had come before the outcry, and there in his house Kaldah sat sulking because his Prince had not gone when Rudroon hailed Puck for an outing.

"Yo-ho! Kaldah!" Helder cried softly. "There is sport afoot. You and the Fiddlers! And be quick, or a Palace Guard springs up to hail me back again. Out the West Gate and around the wall down to the Copses! I know the Old South Gate is shorter way; but, if we try for that, we are surely turned back. No call, Kobold, that we may have start of all others!"

They slipped out the West Gate and away; and behind they heard the Elfin Horns calling the Fairies to gather. They passed the Old South and the New South Gate, well within shelter of the woods, and

behind them they saw a goldclad company sweep out of the Town and make off over the ridges.

"Keep above, Kaldah! Here, to this slope," whispered Helder, as the Flying Guards of Goldemar came tearing along the glade. "If we are seen so near to Fairie Town, we shall be turned: the Leader will prate something of danger and the Queen's wish. Up! Their eyes are on every twig. This will be wonderful to see. The Witch Folk are an unknown clan to me."

Kaldah shook his head as the two raced on together.

"I doubt they are an uncanny lot," he said, disapprovingly. "One never knows what they think of, or what they purpose next. Give me the peasant people of the Valleys, or the Folk of the Western Hills. My Plume! I would rather have to do with the Nixies than with them."

"Are they at all like us of Fairie Town?"

Kaldah shrugged his shoulders as he dodged under lowhung boughs and leapt on again.

"I cannot tell: I have never seen them."

Helder sniffed at the answer. It was always the same when one asked the Crowd that question.

"There are the Copses," he cried merrily at last. "Now, turn and down! The Flyers are before us: if we are not swift, the sport is over before we reach them. Come!"

But Kaldah had halted and was looking half-frightened.

"I think, my lord Prince, we will turn back," he said uneasily.

Helder's anger flamed up, and the taunt, "If you are afraid, I go on alone," changed the Kobold's thought; but he threw his own cloak over the Prince's shoulders and covered the flaming Ruby Clasp before he would consent to move; and the Fiddlers looked on with approving nods.

Then, on down to the Copses. They found the bushes sadly pulled; leaves strewing the ground, boughs torn and tangled, and, worst of all, the clean cut of the knife—twigs dripping sap, showing where the precious wands had been taken. It was great havoc. They found the Flyers glaring on all sides and beating the air with their belts.

"What trouble is it?" Helder cried out.

"The Witches have been robbing the Copses," was the savage answer.

The group seemed ready to fall to beating one another in their anger, so Helder left them and went on. Kaldah and the Fiddlers had gone to search on their own account.

"Where are the Witches?" he asked of the next group of fierce-faced Guards.

"They are gone," the group snapped in answer.

Flyers came up from all sides bearing leaves and twigs and laying them together in careful piles. Now came another, with a bundle of wands dripping sap as their bearer moved them.

"This I snatched in midair as it went plunging off," he said, and with ginger fingers he placed it on the ground.

"And this *I* snatched as it was making off," a new voice cried exultingly; and the Leader of the Flying Guards strode into the circle, dragging someone after him.

Helder looked with all his eyes. He looked a long time. Then he turned to one of the Flyers. They were wild with joy and their cries brought their fellows hurrying to join them.

"Is that one of the Witches?" Helder whispered.

The Flyer nodded, his face drawn up in a snarl. But the Leader caught sight of the royal twin: he called others to come and hold, and stepped to his master's son.

"My lord Prince, how come you here?" he asked, and he hurried Helder out of the group. "This is no place for you. They have spells to cast, these Witches —one looks at them, and the joy of life is gone forever. Where are your Fiddlers, my lord?"

"They are here."

Helder waved his hand vaguely on all sides.

"You had best return with *them* to Royal Goldemar's Palace."

The hint was plain. Prince Helder bowed, and the Leader bowed, and the two parted. But the Prince did not set out towards the walls of Fairie Town when the Leader turned his back. He took the opposite

way, and wandered blandly on, and presently he came upon Kaldah and the Fiddlers. Kaldah's shoulders were drawn up to his ears, and he shook his head as he walked among the bushes.

"My cap! It has never before been so bad as this," he said. "I thank my lantern, I am not of the Elf men who have the Copses in charge. It will be no merry time, telling Royal Goldemar how it came that a Moss Maid must needs warn Fairie Town that its greatest treasure is being plundered. My Prince, look what I found, lying among the leaves here on the ground," and he handed Helder a little box, a box so small that it was hid when the hand closed upon it, so brightly gold that it flashed back the sun's rays. Strange tracings stood out on its sides, and the little cover was tight fast.

Helder handled it curiously.

"What is it?"

"It is a box," Kaldah said wisely. "Keep it as a memory of the day when the Witch Dames broke into the Copses, and not even the farfamed Flyers could catch one of them."

Kaldah chuckled.

"They caught one over yonder." Helder waved the box towards the group he had left. "The Leader said it was not safe to look; he sent me away——"

But Helder was talking to the air and what might be hid in it. Kaldah and the Fiddlers had made off with

great cries of wonder, and left him standing in the Copse, alone.

"Now for a Prince who is never to be out of the sight of many Fairie Folk, I seem but little looked at," Helder thought.

He threw back the cloak Kaldah had given him, thrust his hands into his belt, and taking a roundabout way so as not to come into sight of the Flyers, strolled back towards Fairie Town. He was not angry with the Kobolds for having left him; it was a rare treat to be once more alone in the woods: but he was angry that he had told Kaldah and the Fiddlers about the Witch Maid, and he was angry that the Leader should have dragged her along as he did, and that the Flyers should stare and jeer. Great, black eyes, frightened and angry; a mass of dark hair; but, "The Nixies were fairer," he said to himself as he sauntered along. "The Nixies were certainly fairer," and then he frowned. She was doubtless a most wicked being: that was the nature of all Witch Folk. Yet the Flyers need not have handled the maid so roughly.

Presently there was a rush, and Puck and his cronies were about Helder. Puck was breathless, and so were the others; and Helder looked at them in wonder.

"What do you do here, my lord Prince? Where are your Fiddlers? And where is Prince Rudroon? We lost him in the Hills, how, I know not. We went back to Fairie Town and he was not in the Street;

neither had he passed the Palace Guards. So we have come back again to search for him, for we heard rumours of Witch Folk ; and we are afraid, knowing the King's word that the Princes are not to be left alone."

" It is plain that you are all of you a worthless lot," Helder told the panting throng, " and my wonder is King Goldemar chooses any of you as escort to his royal sons. You have lost Prince Rudroon ; the Fiddlers have lost Prince Helder. Clearly your eyes are hung at home in the Street, and your wits have gone to gather fern-seed."

The Kobolds listened, grinning broadly.

" Prince Rudroon is without doubt lost, and will through your fault never again be seen. It is in my mind that he has gone off with the Folk who have been pulling the Copses to bits. Go down yonder and ask the Witch Maid, whom the Leader has caught, if I speak not the truth."

The Kobolds gasped. At the words, " Witch Maid " and " caught " it was as though they could not believe their ears.

" A Witch Maid ! Caught ! Did you see her, Prince ? "

" Yes," said Helder ; but he was already angry for having spoken, for Puck and the rest took to their heels to have a look at this Witch Maid.

" More Folk to stare and cry out," Helder thought crossly. " If it be true that they all cast spells, the

spell she casts is to make all Folk run from me so soon as I open my lips to speak," and he went on towards the gates of Fairie Town.

"Whist-oo! Whist-oo!" Longdrawn and soft and cuddled on the air. It was as the call of a bird, or the whisper of the wind creeping out to meet the dusk; and Helder lifted his head and answered.

A moment later Rudroon had seized his twin by the arm and was shaking him.

"Helder, you will yet drive me to great madness and senseless words."

"Then you had best not speak," Helder advised.

"My Plume! The time I have had! Now, to find you; before, to slip away from Puck and his crew and enter Fairie Town without the Gate Guards seeing me——"

"Since when is it that the Gate Guards must not see the Prince Royal?" drawled Helder.

"I was not alone," Rudroon explained.

"Ah! You doubtless had a company of Witch Folk with you; each one flourished a hazel wand, newly stolen from the Copses, and they one and all cast spells on Fairie Town."

Helder sighed and dropped onto a stone, but his brother pulled him up again, scolding: "What is this talk of yours of Witches? I know nothing of any Witches. I have found that in the Western Hills to-day which Royal Goldemar would be one great amaze and anger to see within his kingdom; and 't is more

concern of yours than that of anyone in Fairie Town. Come with me!"

"Where are we going?" asked Helder as Rudroon rushed along ahead of him.

"To Thorn Palace."

Rudroon was wild in his excitement: he had found a path, a new path, that opened to the touch, leading straight from the outer Thicket which formed part of the vaunted wall of Fairie Town, into the familiar, tangled thorn rose garden. Rudroon chuckled as the twins raced along together and he told Helder about it.

"'T was by the smallest chance I found it," he said. "I knew it was useless to try to pass the Folk that are always gathered by the New South Gate; but I hoped by the aid of the Kobold cloak I threw about him to take him safely in by the Old Gate, reach our bit of Palace Garden—by climbing the wall—and go through to the hidingplace——"

"And how long must I wait," Helder asked, suddenly stopping in the race, "before I learn *why* you must enter Fairie Town without being seen, and what this being is that you are so quick to take into our secret grounds?"

"Come and learn."

"You tell me now."

"But there is no time! Look! There are the walls of Fairie Town. If we are seen——"

"It is one to me. I go on no fool's errand." Hel-

der sat down in the path. "It is a joke," he said, "and that joke is a game you play alone."

Rudroon stamped his foot.

"It is *no* joke. It is a lad from the Valleylands. Whether madness is upon him, or not, I cannot tell; but he speaks wildly and says he was told to ask for the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town. That is most surely you, Helder. Come quickly: I will take you by the new path——"

"Why did you not tell me that before?" Helder asked, jumping up.

"I wished to keep it for a surprise: it is long since we have seen people from the Valleys, and they are good to look at, even the stupidest, for the memory of the days we spent among them."

But the dispute cost Helder dear; for, as they were stealing past the New South Gate, well hidden, as they thought, by the woods, a messenger suddenly bowed before them—"The Princes to the Queen!" and, shrugging their shoulders, the two turned in and took their way to the Palace. So Helder did not see the new path Rudroon had found that afternoon, and the sunset hour was passing before they managed to slip through by the old familiar way into the forgotten garden of the Thorn Palace.

There by the broken fountain stood the lad from the Valleylands. He was clutching something that hung by a chain from his neck, and his eyes turned, half eagerly, half fearfully upon the two Princes.

"This is he," said Rudroon, pointing to Helder.

The lad stepped close to Helder, and looked him straight in the eyes. Then he started back.

"This is the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town," Rudroon said again.

The lad's eyes shifted to Rudroon's face, and his brows lowered.

"What is it you want of him, of the Prince?" Rudroon asked.

The other made a gesture of contempt.

"I do not want *him!*" he said disdainfully, pointing to Helder. "And I want no more of *you!* At first, because of the strangeness, I did not know you; but now— Why have you brought me to this place?" he asked in sudden fury, "where all is closed in and one cannot go away if one wish? What of the promise you gave me when we met in the woods yonder? Let me see the Fiddler Prince, I say! It was your word. Give me my sister, and let us go back to our home. I wish no more of your pranks: I know you of old!"

Helder seated himself on the edge of the broken fountain. He put one foot over his knee, and tapped the sole of his shoe.

"So *this* is the wondrous surprise you had for me?" he drawled, eying his royal twin with lifted brows.

Rudroon rubbed his head in perplexity.

"He is wilder than ever. His words were strange enough before, but he would not have it that he knew us. You know," Rudroon added in a lower tone, "it

is said the air of the Western Hills makes madness in the minds of the mortals. We see, now, it is over true."

The stranger stamped his foot.

"I am *not* mad," he cried; "but what have I to do with you? You are not the one I am after, either of you. You are two runaway stablelads, and that is all."

Rudroon began to grow angry.

"Let be with your stamping of feet," he ordered. "Did I not meet you in the woods out yonder, and did you not beg me by all that was most dear to me to take you to the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town? Well, *there* stands the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town. Is this your thanks to me?"

The lad's lips curled.

"You make sport of me. *He*, the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town!" He pointed at Helder in scorn. "He was stablelad at my father's Hof. He ran away by night and did not take his wage money; but he took other things. He is no more than a common thief."

The frown on Rudroon's face deepened.

"This passes all jest," he muttered, stepping closer to his brother. "I shall give him a taste of the Ruby Clasp; 't is the only thing to bring him to his senses."

"Let be," whispered Helder; and the lad stormed on.

"You thought to make all well again; but had I

been at the house when you came back, you would have had such a drubbing as you would not yet be recovered from, in spite of your leaving gold to pay for the maid's clothing you took. That clothing was my sister's."

His voice broke in an angry sob.

"Helder!" cried Rudroon, "how can you sit there and listen to those ravings? The only thing for him is a Kobold beating——"

But Helder took the belt from his brother's hand.

"Can you not see? He has changed; but, surely enough, it is the sheeplad at the Hof where lives the witless granny who first told us of the Strange Player and his Albleyk melody."

Then Helder turned to the Valleylad, who was sobbing excitedly.

"Sit you down there on the grass," he said, "and tell me this tale from the beginning. It is not in our mind to make sport of you. You are right; we were both of us stablelads in the Hof of your father; but it is true that our home is here in these Hills and that I am called 'the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town.' If we could but understand, it might be we could greatly help you. What is this you say? You want your sister? Where is she?"

"I do not know," the lad answered, checking his sobs. "She is lost."

"How did it happen?"

"It happened before you came to us," he said with

weary impatience. "There came one through our upland valley playing melodies——"

Rudroon started and the blood rushed to Helder's face.

"My sister heard the melodies: I saw her standing at his side, listening. The tune was a fair one, I grant you; yet nothing to harken to forever, so I went on home, leaving her at the crossroads with him a-playing the fiddle before her. She never came back. We searched the country round; but the one who had played had gone, and we could find nothing."

He clutched the grass in his hands.

"Then—that was after you two had come and gone, and the clothes we prized so dear were taken—I will beat you yet for your deed—" he broke off angrily, and jumped to his feet. Rudroon, too, sprang up; but Helder pulled Rudroon down beside him, and pushed the lad back to his place on the grass.

"The beating comes later," he said quietly, "when you have finished the tale. 'After we had come and gone,' what happened?"

"One day I was coming home with the sheep," the lad resumed sullenly. "I had been a long time gone in the hills, and even as I drove them down the last slope towards the Hof, I heard—I swear I heard—the melody, the same, yet played not the same, the one my sister listened to at the crossroads. I let the sheep be! I rushed to the house! The people stood gaping about the table, fingering a pile of gold; and in a heap on

the floor lay a bundle, dirty, tattered, the Sunday garb she looked so fair in. I called out; I told them to come, to scatter in search, that we might catch the evil player and have her back again. They would not listen. They were crying to one another that the two stablelads had come back with a crowd of folk, that the one who had taken the clothes—you, there, on the fountain—had brought them back and left gold in payment and an asking of pardon for having made off with them. Again I told what I had heard, but they pushed me aside. They had already begun to dig a hole, deep under the cellar floor, to hide the treasure, and they had thought for nothing else.

"So I let them be. I let all be. I ran out to see whether I alone could not catch the player, and, as I rushed through the Hof towards the open, I came upon a fellow all brownclad, who stood by the dairy door, a pot of cream in his hand, drinking his fill. Another time I should have beaten him for the deed——"

Rudroon and Helder giggled.

"But I had forgotten all. I asked, Where was the one who had played the melody? At that he laughed and set down the pot and cried—I know the words forever in my heart—'Here is *another* who has caught the madness of the fiddle!' 'Where is the player? Where?' I know the words I spoke. 'The player of the melody goes into the sunset,' was the answer. 'Follow as you may;' and the brown fellow was gone."

The lad rose.

'So I have followed into the sunset," he cried, stretching out his arms. "I have come far; I have come fast and have not waited. I have been wet by great storms; I have been cold and I have been hungry, and I have been alone in the dark in a strange land. Yet I made always to the west, and at last I came to your sunset hills. But," he shuddered, "when I came, it was as though all I had done was to be for no end; for, though the hills rose before me, I could not mount their slopes; all paths turned me back and I was ever in a maze."

Helder looked puzzled; but Rudroon whispered, "They say in the Street that that is true for the mortals, when they seek to come to us in the Western Hills. How came you at last through?" he asked the boy curiously.

"There were people below who helped me. They told me to go on, and always to ask for the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town; that *he* was the one who played that melody. Tell me now, I pray you, where can I find that Prince, and where has he taken my sister?"

Helder looked at the Valleylad, and his face was very sober.

"I know not who it is who may have told you this," he said. "That one speaks but half the truth. You look for the same one for whom many more look and whom they have not been able to find. We make no maids follow us here into Goldemar's Fairie Town. Your sister is not with us."

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The lad looked at him a long time ; he put his hands to his head as one who cannot think. Then he started forward.

" I must go away and see if I can find her elsewhere," he said hurriedly.

He looked about him uncertainly, into the darkening corners of the lonely garden, at the dim palace towers, and the Rose Wall waving eerie streamers in the dusk. Then he again turned to the twins.

" The Fiddler Prince does not live here ? " was his troubled question.

Rudroon pointed to Helder.

" I have already told you many times. *That* is the Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town," he announced. " But he has not — Helder, do you hear anyone calling from the other side ? "

" Have you a fiddle ? " the Valleylad asked Helder at the same moment.

Helder nodded.

" Helder, they *are* calling from the gardens, and yours is the name," Rudroon said anxiously. " Come, or we shall be caught."

The twins started for the Rose Wall ; but the lad took Helder by the arm.

" I cannot stay here ! I have not the time ! Tell me quickly, where is your fiddle, and let me go."

" You cannot go now : they would catch you as you came through, and you would never walk in the Valleylands again. I will come in the evening—only see

to it that you make no noise while you are left here alone—and I will help you to go away."

The lad followed him to the wall. Rudroon already stood beckoning within the tiny path that had opened to his touch. Helder sprang to his brother's side. The lad pressed towards them.

"Where do you keep your fiddle?" he called; but long, prickly branches snapped back, striking him in the face. Helder turned, waved his hand commanding silence, and disappeared into the darkness of the Rose Thickets.

III

THE SPELL OF THE FIDDLE.

RUDROON and Helder were scarcely through the Rose Thickets and safely into Goldemar's gardens before Puck and Kaldah stood before them.

"My Plume! Prince!" Kaldah gasped; "you show yourself at last! The King is in a pretty rage at being kept waiting. We have had a merry time of it, Puck and I. We were sent for, to tell where you and Prince Rudroon were——"

"Hm!" said Helder—he was not at all in haste, though the Kobolds were hurrying him away to the Palace. "That comes of leaving the Princes whom you are sworn to guard with your lives—Kobolds they are, too, and of your own clan—and going achasing through the Western Hills. 'T is not your fault we are not dead—of fright if nothing else, at being left alone an hour, or two. My head turns at the thought of the dangers that have beset me while I walked home through the woods."

"Let be your jests, Prince, and come. Goldemar's anger is no joking matter."

"Faith, that is true," Rudroon admitted. "Get you to royal Goldemar," he advised his brother. "Tell him you and the fiddle are safe. No, better show him the fiddle, Helder: its safety lies on his mind more than your welfare does. His wish was to lock it away altogether when, on our return, he heard the tale of it from Puck, here, who must needs go aprating of how many people wish for it."

Puck frowned, and Helder wriggled. He knew that what Rudroon said was true, and that it was only the Queen's doing that he was still allowed to have his treasure. As it was, he must bring the fiddle daily to the King and show it; and nights when he slept, it was taken and locked away, where, he himself did not know.

As they entered the Palace, the Leader of the Flying Guards burst from the Throne Room, and brought up short against them.

"Ah! The Prince is found! The King has sent more messengers asearching. But, Prince, where is the fiddle? You were not told?" and he stared at the two Kobolds. "You and the fiddle are bidden to the King in the Throne Room: he and the Elf-chiefs wait."

"What did I tell you?" laughed Rudroon. "Am I, too, bidden to join them, most worthy——"

"There was no word concerning you, my lord Prince."

Rudroon shrugged his shoulders, and turned on his heel.

"What is it that they want with the fiddle?" Helder asked anxiously, as, his fiddle in his arms, he stepped into the entrance way to the Throne Room, and found it crowded with gaping Palace Folk. Kaldah was waiting for him, and Kaldah's eyes blazed with excitement. "What is it, Kaldah? Tell me quick before I go. I have never before been hailed to show it in the Throne Room and before the Elf-chiefs."

"It is because of the Witch Maid they caught this day. She was taken before the King, and she will not speak. It is my mind he thinks——"

But before Helder had grasped the meaning in Kaldah's hurried speech the doors had swung open, the heralds cried his name, and he had entered the Throne Room.

There the Queen sat on the throne; there stood Goldemar beside her, as was his wont. Half frightened, Helder saw the Elf-chiefs gathered to one side—had he been summoned to a private Council? On the other side stood the Leader and a group of Flying Guards. He saw them all at a glance; he saw the mocking eyes and the angry lips of the Witch Maid, though he did not look at her. He stepped forward; he shifted his fiddlebow, and lifted his lantern in greeting to the royal couple.

Goldemar scarcely waited to return greeting.

"My lord Prince!" he called.

The Witch Maid turned. The colour left her cheeks, and her eyes grew wide with fright. Goldemar saw it,

and a quick, fierce smile lit up his face. The head of the Elf-chiefs strode up to her.

"Now will you answer the King's questions?" he asked; but the girl's eyes dropped to the floor and she did not speak.

"My lord Prince," Goldemar again called, "do you see this maid?"

Helder raised his lantern and bowed his head.

"Know you who she is?"

"She is a Witch Maid," Helder answered, wondering at her pale face. Why should she have become so frightened when he entered the Throne Room?

But King Goldemar was looking surprised.

"How know you that?" he asked.

"I saw her in the Copses this day, and I was told."

The Queen started forward in her seat; and the King frowned.

"How came you there?" he asked quickly.

"I went for the daily running with Kaldah and the guard. Our way was toward the Copses. We chanced upon the Leader and his Flyers."

The King let the matter drop.

"Prince," he said, "you know the Witch Folk are great enemies to the Fairie Folk?"

He paused, and Helder answered, "That I have been told; but the reason I have not been told."

Helder bent to hook his lantern to his belt; when he looked up again, the King's face was sterner than ever, and on the Queen's lips hovered the last of a smile.

"The reason is not for you," royal Goldemar said shortly. "It is enough that you are told. This Witch Maid whom we have caught stealing in our Copses has certain knowledge concerning her kind; but she will answer no question that is put to her."

"Has she told you she has the knowledge?" Helder asked, forgetting the Throne Room and the Elf-chiefs who stood about.

"No," said King Goldemar. Then he bent and whispered in Helder's ear.

Helder's fingers clutched the fiddle as he listened. His eyes began to gleam, and he looked first at the Witch Maid, and then at the King.

"But can I?" he asked breathlessly.

"If what you say of the doings of your toy in the Valleylands is *true*—" Goldemar began; but Helder interrupted, drawing himself up.

"There is no reason for speaking that which did not happen, my lord," he said in precisely the same tone which the King used.

"Then there can be no doubt but that it is the fiddle that has the power," Goldemar said; and again he bent and whispered.

"What questions am I to ask her?"

The young voice was clear and full, and the King all but stamped his foot.

"I will tell you when the time comes. Now, play!"

Helder threw back his head, and, turning suddenly, stepped before the Witch Maid. He fixed her with his

eyes as he flung the fiddle to his shoulder, and he saw her shrink back, putting up one hand, as though to ward off a blow. He raised his hand, ready to bring his bow down upon the strings. The bow poised in air; one moment more, and a long, sweet note would fill the room. But no tone came: slowly the bow was lowered, and Helder turned back to the King.

"It is your wish, my lord King," he said slowly, "that I play the tune which the Strange Player played in the Valleylands when he wished to make people do his will?"

"Yes," said the King.

Helder looked at the Witch Maid. She had grown whiter than ever, and the Flyers were staring at her with mocking faces. A sudden frown flashed into the Prince's eyes; he dropped the bow still farther, and began tracing the pattern of the floor.

"Play the tune, Prince," ordered the King.

"I will not," said Helder.

"You will not!"

"No."

For a moment all was still in the Throne Room —only the quick breathing of excited Folk; no other sound.

Then, "And shall I be balked by you!" the King burst forth, and wrenching the bow from the Prince's hand, he raised it to strike at his son's head; but the Witch Maid suddenly twisted herself free, and, darting in between, seized the ruler's arm.

"Strike him not with the fiddlebow, King Goldemar!"

All crowded nearer in amaze; with a sullen lowering of the brows she let go her hold upon the King, and the guards dragged her back.

Slowly Goldemar dropped his arm.

"Why must I not strike him with the fiddlebow?" he asked, at last.

The maid frowned still more.

"It is nought to me," she said; "but strike him with that fiddlebow, and he loses his wits."

To Rudroon, waiting without in the highdomed hall, the time was long. When at last the doors swung back and the heralds raised their lanterns in greeting, what did he see? Helder; but without his fiddle, and a row of guards on either side of him! They did not pause; they looked neither to one side nor the other; the doors of the Throne Room swung shut after them, and they marched from the hall.

Rudroon sprang after them, seized upon his brother, and waved the guards back.

"Helder, what is it?" he gasped.

Helder pushed the hands slowly from his arm.

"They have taken the fiddle," he said in a dull voice. "I am to go to our tower, and be a prisoner there, alone, and you are not to see me."

Then he turned away; but in a moment he was back again, his hands in his brother's.

"Rudroon," he whispered. "The lad from the Valleylands! See to it that you take him from the Thorn Palace to-night and safe out of Fairie Town. It was my word I gave him that he should go. You must get me that word back again!"

IV

THE VALLEYLAD'S ERRAND.

A DAY and a night; a day and a night; and yet another. Ah, the days were long up there alone in the tower; and the nights were longer yet, when Helder could hear the hum of Fairie Town, when he could see a myriad lights aflash, as the lightfooted elfin Folk sped up and down their streets. The scent of the Rose Thickets came to him, heavy with dew; and one gold turret of Thorn Rose's Palace blinked at him if he leaned far enough from the window.

He knew how the unkept garden within those Thickets looked with the moonlight shed over it. Roses, roses everywhere, bending, bowing, swaying at cornice and windowledge. He knew the overpowering stillness in the great, unused palace, the neverending halls, the rooms with dusty shadows changing on the floor.

He wondered what Rudroon was about, and how Rudroon had got the Valleylad from the palace and clear of Fairie Town — that it had been done went without saying, for Rudroon had the wits of many in

his young head. He wondered how the lad was now faring, and what had been done with the Witch Maid.

A day and a night; a day and a night; and yet two more; but with the fifth noon Rudroon came rushing up the stair and burst into the room with the news that the freedom of the Town was again Helder's.

"Your watchmen guards have been sent from the tower, and all is again as it was before."

But Helder stamped his foot.

"The guards brought me here. At least, they should come again to lead me forth. It is a right."

"Doubtless," soothed Rudroon; "but you had best be thankful you are free to go in any way. How the Queen turned royal Goldemar to her wish passes my understanding. It was not in his mind to have you forth again until you sent him word you were ready to do his bidding," and he threw an arm about his twin's shoulder.

"Helder," he said, "why would you not try the spell of the fiddle upon the Witch Maid? It might have been that many things could have been learnt from her."

Helder linked his arm in his brother's.

"Rudroon, what has been done with my fiddle?"

"Oh, your fiddle! You need have no fear. Royal Goldemar has it safe. They say he counts it a great strength, and hopes some day through it to find the Country of the Strange Player, the treasure, and the people the Player has stolen away. Royal Goldemar

now tries to play upon it himself; but it is a sorry work: I have heard him."

Helder's clenched hand came down upon the windowledge.

"It all makes me very angry, Rudroon," he groaned. Then, turning, "But tell me," he added, "how did you take the shepherd away from the Thorn Palace and the Town of Fairie?"

Rudroon's arm dropped from his brother's shoulder, and he settled himself on the windowledge.

"Helder," he said impressively, "Helder, that is what I want to tell you, and that is why I begged the Queen that I might be the first to come to you and that I might come alone."

He paused and looked anxiously at his twin.

"The shepherd from the Valleylands has not gone away," he said.

"Was he caught?" asked Helder, alarmed; for, if he were caught, it was sure death. King Goldemar guarded the Western Hills these days as never before.

"No, he was not caught," Rudroon answered slowly. "He is still behind the Rose Thickets yonder, and no one knows that a mortal breathes in Fairie Town. The fault is mine: I would not let him go."

"But, Rudroon, my word that you were to get me back again!"

"I know. I knew that would be your cry; but——"

"But my word——"

"Your word can wait," Rudroon cried excitedly. "Helder, do not strike!" and he warded off the blow. "That lad, the hour he is clear of Fairie Town, goes straight to the Witch Dames — I know 't is they, though he does not—and tells them where the Fiddler Prince keeps himself, and that the Fiddler Prince keeps his fiddle in the Palace of Fairie Town."

Helder drummed his fingers on the windowledge.

"What has that to do with the word which I gave the lad and which I have not kept?" he asked sternly.

"Helder, where are your wits? How could you keep your word when you were locked in the tower here and Goldemar's men stood guard all about? It is nothing to be so angry over. He could have gone; I would have taken him, that very night, as you asked; he had but to say he would not seek the Witch Dames with his tale of you, and in a twinkling he would have been through the Thickets by the new path I have found and back in the woods again. But no! He is as daft over the word he has given as is the fiery-eyed and frowning Fiddler Prince, is the shepherd. 'Shepherd'!"

Rudroon jumped from the windowledge.

"Mortal shepherd he *may* be; but it is my mind he is a spy of the Strange Player's."

Helder's foot tapped the floor impatiently, as he eyed his brother.

"It were better you told me how you come by all this knowledge."

Rudroon ran his fingers through his hair.

"You are not pleased," he sighed. "I feared it would be so; and yet, if I had known you would be ten times angrier with me than you are, I should have done as I did. How I came by the knowledge? After you were taken to the tower and I saw I could by no means go to you, I went awalking in the gardens. It was the hour for me to have been sleeping, according to the rules by which we live; but there was great excitement among the Palace Folk, and the Queen was so taken up with the thought of Prince Helder that she forgot there had ever been a son of hers called Rudroon. I slipped through the Thickets by our old way and came upon the lad—Knowt, his name is, though that is a small matter. I had no mind to have much talk with him: he was not the sport I thought he would be, and my one wish was to be swiftly rid of him. I told him to be quick and follow me; but he who had been in such haste to go now hung back.

"'This is the place called Fairie Town, is it not so?' he asked; and then he asked again, 'I beg of you, tell me—you say my sister is not here—is there then no such person among you called "The Fiddler Prince"?' I told him—I was already hoarse with the telling him before—that that was the name by which you had come to be called. I doubt he has the

thought straight in his muddled brain even now; but he said, 'And does then this brother of yours play the fiddle?' 'So that the leaves jump from their limbs and follow? 'T is most wonderful to see,' I told him. 'Where does he keep his fiddle?' was the next question of this shepherd Knowt; and like the Prince of Fools I answered before I thought, 'Where but in Goldemar's Palace!' Then, Helder, it came to my mind that these questions had after all little enough to do with the wild search he says he is making for his sister, and I asked him his reason for his questioning. He would not tell; he was again in great haste to be gone; but I sat me down on the fountain and said there was no hurry, I could wait until it was his pleasure to give me the answers I had a mind to have before we parted. Then he told me his tale."

Rudroon dropped back on to the windowseat, and pulled his brother down beside him.

"Do you remember, he told us that when he came to the beginnings of the Western Hills, he could not enter their gorges and was all confused?"

Helder nodded.

"And that at last people came to him and helped him, and so he came on to us?"

"I remember."

"He said it was an old woman who suddenly appeared before him and asked him his trouble. She looked like any old woman of the Valleylands, he said, but that she was quaintly garbed, and had a

frightening eye, and wore high on one cheek—Helder, what black mark is it that Puck told us was the sure sign of Witch Dames?"

Helder drew a figure in the air.

"Yes," nodded Rudroon. "Thus Knowt, too, had it; only, he drew it more clumsily in the sand of the garden path, and I held my lantern that he might see. High on one cheekbone, so. He told her his tale, and she told him it was the Fiddler Prince whom he must find, and that she would give him the power to see and walk upon the paths that led into the sunset to this Prince's home and to see the Folk who lived there after he was once safe within the land, but—now mind you, Helder, what he must do for this sight he was to have!—he must learn, first, if the Fiddler Prince now lived within the Town of Fairie; then, if it were his wont to go often beyond its walls; and when he played his fiddle, and where he played his fiddle, and where he kept his fiddle, and what the Folk thought of his fiddle. These few things, in short, the slowwitted lad of the Valleylands was to spy out when he came blundering into our Western Hills; and whether he found his sister and brought her away with him, or not, he must go back there to the spot where they stood, and to a certain stone, and tell the Dame what he had learnt. Now, Helder," Rudroon ended earnestly, "what think you of that? He gave his word; she gave him the sight; and now he swears the minute he is free he goes back and tells her what he knows. You

can say yourself if I have not done right in keeping him."

Helder moved impatiently.

"He surely could tell them little more than they already know. The fiddle is safe; and Fairie Town is safe with its walls and its guards. They could not enter. Yet, even without that, I gave him my word——"

Rudroon dragged his brother from the windowledge and across the room to the door.

"I tell you this Knowt is best where he is," he said decidedly. "He has food: I took it him. And, now, come to the Queen: she would see you; after that, Helder, let us away to the Gates, for the sentries have been sending word that there is trouble afoot at the Walls."

"What manner of trouble?" Helder asked listlessly, as they went down the stairs.

"That I do not know; but even the King has been to look. There comes a Queen's runner for us. My Plume! I should have told you before that she wished to talk with you."

V

THE EVIL VOICE.

"ABOUT the Witch Folk it may be as it will," Helder said to himself as he slipped into the Thorn Rose Garden; "but this Knowt goes free: Prince Helder's word is not to be given and broken in a breath," and he looked about him in search of the lad.

Rudroon was safely away at the Gates; and the Queen had done with him: so he was not likely to be called. But he was in haste to be done with this shepherd, wild tale, lost sister, and all.

The lad was not in the garden; and Helder went on up the marble steps into the wide halls of the palace. The sunbeams were rioting on the floors; the roses were rioting at the windows; but all was silence, and he passed from one set of rooms to another, wondering where Knowt kept himself. At length, turning into a last gallery, a vague sound of mumbling greeted him, and he tiptoed toward the sound, laughing softly and thinking that the Valleylad talked to himself to keep from growing dull.

The gallery was a long one, and opened at the end through a narrow, latticed door into a tiny dimlit room. He knew the place : he had been there before. It was in truth little more than a passageway ; for three steps took you across the floor to another narrow door which opened into another gallery leading to another wing of the palace.

Helder crept to the door and peeped through. He started back and brushed his hands across his eyes. Then he looked again.

She had been in his thoughts ; she had been in his dreams, she and the fiddle, forever mingled in strangest manner. No one had spoken to him of her since he had come from the tower ; no one had spoken of the fiddle ; and he had cared to ask no question about either. And here, now, here of all places, he saw her, crouched on the floor with her head against the wall, the Witch Maid whom the Flying Guards had caught in the Hazel Copses. She was alone, quite alone — Helder saw that—and her lips were shut; yet the room was filled with a voice, a cruel, grating voice, and the sound sent the chill through Helder's frame.

" It has been a fool's doing from beginning to end. Can I stay always close-housed with the lot of you ? One would think you none of you had the wits to be left alone from a sunrise to its setting. I go away ; I come back, and what do I find ? A wild disorder ; not one wand brought from the Hazel Copses; some struck

by the Fairie Town Folk, for all the Folk could not see them, and made unfit for work ; and, to top all, the news that you were caught and dragged away. That such a thing should have happened, and to you ! Where do you leave your thoughts that you go charging into the Western Hills in such a way as to be seen by all ? "

The Witch Maid turned her head impatiently.

" Is it my fault," she defended herself, " that you send me with wares to the Valley towns where one must be seen, or the people cannot buy ? When I came back, the word was, ' To the Copses, as you are, and not one moment to wait.' "

She shrugged her shoulders ; but the voice broke out angrily.

" I left the word not so. Who gave it you ? That one shall suffer."

" I will not tell : there has been too much suffering."

" Then all shall pay alike," was the grating retort. " And now, what have you learnt ? How came you here of all places ? And why is it that I have had no word from you ? "

The Witch Maid looked straight before her : to Helder it seemed as though she were looking into eyes that he had not the power to see.

" I have already told you," she said. " How could you have word from me ? By whom should the word go ? No one came to me ; and I could not leave since my box was gone."

"Where is the box? This is a lesson never to trust anyone! Where is the box?"

"It dropped from my girdle when the Folk seized me in the Hazel Copses."

Helder thought the Witch Maid turned pale and caught her breath as she answered; but no burst of anger followed her speech.

"I shall find the box," the voice said quietly. "There are none who are not of the clan who know its value; and I shall have it back again. Now, tell me what you have learnt here in the midst of the Folk of Fairie Town."

The Maid's hands went to her head.

"I have learnt nothing," she said between set teeth. "I was caught and dragged before the King, and I was asked where was the home of the Witch Folk and how great was their strength; and I would not speak. They took me and locked me away in their prison-house; and watchmen stood without." She moved uneasily. "To-day, they came to the prisonhouse in great anger, dragged me forth, carried me through the streets, and a great Elf of the Town opened the gate of this place, and they brought me in and left me."

"That I know. I saw you and followed, and came in as they came out again. Why did they put you here?"

The Maid hesitated.

"One of the watchmen who stood without the prison door was willing to let me out," she pouted at last.

There was a hoarse laugh, and the voice cackled, "What did you learn from him, Mardah?"

The Witch Maid frowned.

"I have learnt nothing"

"But you have surely heard of the fiddle!"

A slight pause; then, "I heard nothing of the fiddle," she said steadily.

"But the Princes! Surely, you must have heard something of *them!* You must have heard ——"

"I have heard nothing," the Maid repeated.

"And am I to come all this way, entrust myself to great danger, and learn at last that you know nothing!" the voice raged. "This was a chance such as but one in a hundred has once in a lifetime: and you have made nothing of it. The days that have been lost—" there was a sound as though a clenched fist were beating upon the floor—"not even the mortal boy has come back with a word. It may be he thinks himself free of me, but—" a short angry laugh—"his not coming back is the one thing that gives him into my power. He has but three days more to get back the word he gave: he will not come to the stone and speak, so in three days he becomes mine, the thick-headed lad of the Valleys, asearching his witless sister," and there was another laugh.

The Maid looked up wearily.

"You might be content to let one go, or two: you have enough and to spare."

"I let nothing go," was the quick answer; "and now, listen to me. Here is my box——"

She leaned forward with a cry of joy, and Helder, watching breathless, saw of a sudden, hanging in the air, a box, a tiny box, square and shining. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, curious and half-bewildered; but the voice was giving orders, and he had not the time to think.

"You stay here. The guards come at evening to see if you are safe. Wait here until they have seen you—do not go to meet them—then use the box, slip after, and go out with them when they go; and when with the next morning they enter again—they will come each morning and evening—you slip back through with them and show yourself, that they may think nothing amiss. Keep your wits and learn what I would know. This time there shall be no dallying. The time is short: see that you bestir yourself."

The Witch Maid rose. "And you?" she asked.

"I go when the guards first open the Magic Thorn Thicket. They hold the True Token, and I have no power against such—may all spells combine against it! —so I must stay till the gates are opened. I go, and I go fast, but I shall be back—I and others—and it is my mind that *then* we strike our blow."

The Witch Maid leaned against the wall; but there was a sound of moving in the little room, and Helder pressed back around a pillar of the trelliswork next the door that he might escape the eyes of this unknown

horror. Quick, soft footfalls; but they died away down the other gallery, and the Witch Maid's eyes looked down the long arcade of rooms after something which she could see, but which was invisible to him.

His head was whirling. He of the Fairie Folk of the Western Hills, a Kobold, Prince Royal of Fairie Town, and son to the mightiest Elf-King which the kingdoms knew—what had come over him! But it was not he alone: past the quick-eyed Guards of the Walls, down streets swarming with Folk, through the magic portals of the Thorn Rose Palace, here came a something which vaunted fairy eyes could not see, or follow; a something threatening—what he did not dare to think.

He looked again at the Witch Maid. She still leaned against the wall, opening and shutting the lid of the box she held. The box! Kaldah; the Hazel Copses! The box! *Another* box! Kaldah had given him a box—but what had become of it? He rubbed his head: there was so little time to think. Those others would soon be here to strike their blow. Then another thought burst in upon him: the shepherd of the Valleylands! In three days the shepherd came into the power of the Evil Voice. That was *his* deed: he had not done as he had promised. He must get back the word he had given and save this Knowt.

Sliding, crouching, gliding from shadow to shadow that no change of light might send the eyes of the Witch Maid along his way; then, when the turning

hid him, with swift, noiseless feet, Helder leaped back down the long halls through which he had come, wondering, half-ashamed, whether the footsteps which the people of the Valleylands could not hear sounded like hammer blows in the ears of this new and fearsome Folk. He dashed down the marble steps, thanking the fortune which had given it that the Voice had gone the other way, that the gate the Voice sought was at the other end of the palace, and that the room where the Witch Maid sat did not look upon the tangled garden and its broken fountain.

On rounding a corner, he came upon Knowt, the shepherd lad, open-mouthed and ready to cry out. Helder seized him by the shoulder, and clapped a hand over the frightened mouth.

"Speak not, nor scream," he whispered fiercely. "It may be your death. You cannot stay here: you must keep hidden; other folk have come to dwell here since I was put in the tower."

"I know," breathed Knowt as Helder let go of him. "I saw some, gay with spears and belts——"

But Helder was in no mood to listen.

"Come with me," he ordered, dragging Knowt away. "There! Go in there. Mind not the thorns."

He pushed the lad, who winced and hung back and eyed the little space askance — long prickly branches thrown out from the great Thorn Wall, thick-woven to make a tiny hut, and close to the ground a tiny opening by which to enter.

"Go in there, and stay until I come. Go not away: I shall be in haste, and there will be no time to search for you. It may be you will be free to-day."

He pushed Knowt well into the hiding-place, and bounded away.

"If only the Voice does not stand before me awatching," was his thought as he overleapt the fountain and hurled himself against the Thorn Wall, which snapped and swayed and opened its narrow path for him.

Helder was half-way up the tower stair before he heard the voices above him. He had had to wait in the garden, and again he had had to wait near the tower; for Folk blocked the way, and he could not enter without being seen; and he had no wish to be seen, for it meant sure hindering. He was angry at this new delay.

What was happening above in his prison room? There was a place on the last turning where one could hide and hear; and he tiptoed on.

"This hiding about in corners does not please me," he told himself as he squeezed into the corner. "And this listening does not please me greatly, either," he added soberly. Then he listened, for the door above was open and the voices were loud.

"What is this you do to me, Prince? Is it a jest? Jesting is no jest with royal Goldemar."

"King's messenger," commented Helder below in the dark.

"The King would see Prince Helder, and at once."

"My Plume, so would I!" was the grieved answer.

"Rudroon," muttered Helder. "But I cannot see King Goldemar till Knowt is safely gone from Fairie Town. Would they would go—and not find me."

"If you have led me Will-o'-the-Wisping, Prince, the King shall hear of it. Kaldah and the Fiddlers are down at the Wall. More than likely the Prince Helder is with them——".

"Go your ways," cried Rudroon's high-pitched voice. "You are a thankless one. Is it my fault the Prince does not come to the tower at the hour when I think he will come? Go your ways and search for him alone: I have no more to do with you! Nevertheless, it is not in my mind to wait forever for him here. He is doubtless in the Queen's rooms: I shall go to him there."

"Prince, if you see him," implored the messenger, "tell him——"

"Nothing will I tell him." Rudroon was already on the stair, and he held his head high. "Go you to the Wall and ask the Fiddlers, since my word is not to your believing."

"I follow you, Prince," said the messenger humbly.

"As you please."

A moment later the two were lost below in the windings of the stair, and Helder on his knees in the tower room was searching the floor with his hands. Did he remember aright? The guards had left him in this room on the evening when he had refused to try the

fiddle's art upon the Witch Maid. He had unslung his belt when he dropped on the window-ledge: but had it been a dream, or was it true, that something then dropped onto the floor and that, without looking, he had brushed it aside with his foot? On hands and knees painfully, carefully, into every corner of the tower room he went, and the little box, square and shining, came to the light again. Helder leaped to his feet and flourished it in the air; but the gleeful look faded from his face. Two things: another footstep on the stair, and the thought — what did one do with the box, once one had it, that one might become unseen?

VI

THE LITTLE YELLOW CHAIN.

THERE was no time to wait and wonder: the steps were coming nearer; and Helder, feeling and pushing with wary finger, snapped the box-lid open. Smooth, soft, and white, the salve that lay within filled the room with the scent of flowers. A moment, and he had rubbed it on eyes and face and hands, shut down the lid, thrust the box in the bosom of his Kobold tunic, and stepped softly out onto the stair, wondering whether he had done aright, or whether he should instead have eaten the smooth, sweetsmelling stuff.

At the first landing he met a runner who brushed against him and went on with unseeing eyes, breathless.

Helder shrugged his shoulders.

"It may be he would not have seen me anyway," he told himself, as he ran on down the stair and stepped into the gold of the twilight hour. How quick the afternoon had gone!

Another messenger was coming to meet him. Helder placed himself in the way. He had become bolder:

after all, the first Elf must have seen him had the salve lacked power, or been used amiss.

The messenger ran against Helder, and fell back, rubbing his eyes.

"It is a madness," he muttered. "The same thing happens to me that happens to the Guards of the East Gate."

"So that is the trouble," thought Helder. "Doubtless, the Voice came by that way into Fairie Town."

The first Elf appeared in the tower doorway.

"Have you found him?"

"He is not there. Go look for yourself, if you will not believe."

"My Lantern! But royal Goldemar will rage because of this," wailed the second. "The fiddle lies ready waiting, and the Prince cannot be found. Is this a life we lead these days! What has come over Fairie Town?"

"Would I could go to the King's hall and learn what this is all about," Helder thought as he darted away. "What was it Rudroon said about a new path he had found at the other end of the Thorn Garden, —one leading through the Rose Thickets that make part of the Town Wall and opening into the woods beyond the Town?"

He pushed through the Thickets, reached the Thorn Garden, and looked about.

"I cannot wait to find it," and he pulled Knowt from his hiding-place.

Knowt shrieked out in fear.

"What is it? What? I cannot see!"

"Be still, fool," hissed Helder. "Here! Quick! Hold still: there is no time to lose. Your eyes; your hands! Let me rub——"

Knowt looked up at Helder with a sigh of relief.

"The old woman had such a box, and such stuff within," he said, sniffing as Helder rubbed on the salve.

Helder nodded.

"Only, she was not so free in using it: she but put it on one ankle and above one brow. Then the paths of your land opened to my eyes and feet."

Helder nodded again. "I must remember that," he muttered. Then he snapped the lid shut.

"Now, mark my words. You follow me—close. No: you had best take my hand. No questions; and see you do not speak. Tread lightly and quickly as you can, and cry out at nothing. Others cannot see you; so you need not be afraid. Yet brush not against them, or you may be caught, whether they see, or no."

"I cannot take him by the shortest way, through the East Gate, because of the Voice," was Helder's quick decision. "We must go another path which much Folk travel,—from the Palace down the Alleys to Goldemar's New South Gate."

Through the Thorn Thickets and Goldemar's gardens, through the big Palace Gate out into the street; and now—how Knowt's ungainly tread woke echoes

in the place! Folk started as the two passed, and looked at one another with frightened faces; they nudged and whispered that Fairie Town was becoming bewitched. Many Folk stood about, excited, bewildered Folk; and Helder eyed the crowds enviously. What famous sport to move unseen among them and listen to their tales! But here was this Valleylad dragging at his hand, already aweary. On, on; faith, but Goldemar's Gate was a far way off — windings and corners and now — what?

In the midst of an Elf crowd, stepping aside here and there, swift, lithe movements and poised waitings, who was it that stood unnoticed amid many Folk, staring at him in wide-eyed amaze?

Helder hurried on, not daring to look behind. He had known, of course, that this would be, but his heart beat wild at having seen her, the Witch Maid, standing free in the streets of Fairie Town, none looking at her, none knowing that she was near. She must see that he, too, was invisible to all that wildtongued throng, he and the lad whom he dragged after him. How much did she know of their doings? How much could she tell? Would she follow and hinder; would she stay and learn the things which the Voice had a will to know?

At last the Gate was past; the high walls of Fairie Town were gone; and Helder stood with his charge in the shelter of the woods. The Witch Maid had not followed them: of that he was sure; for when they

came to the Gate, he had taken heart and looked back to see.

He dropped the shepherd's hand.

"Knowt, what do you now?"

Knowt stared about him with dull eyes.

"Knowt!" Helder shook him by the arm, and he looked up stupidly.

"I have given a word. I must get back that word," he said slowly; "but it might be, if I went farther before going back, I could find her."

"There is no going farther before you go back," Helder said sternly. "Where must you go to get back the word?"

"I must go to the White Stone by the rock wall. I must beat upon that stone; and even though I see no one, I must say what I have learnt."

Helder was puzzled.

"Where is the White Stone?"

"I do not know," Knowt answered vaguely. "But I can find it," he added.

"How can you find it?" urged Helder; and the shepherd brought a small rod from his pocket and held it out.

"The old woman gave it me: it shows the way," he said simply.

Helder handled it curiously.

"A hand long," he muttered. "Most truly that rod once waved in the Hazel Copses of our Western Hills. I have wondered what was their strength, that they should be called King Goldemar's greatest treas-

ure. So they show a way, do the wands of the Copses," and he fingered the quaint leaden knobs that bound it at either end. Then his thoughts came back.

"Knowt," he cried eagerly, thrusting the rod back into the lad's hands, "take this and go at once. Follow the way it shows to the White Stone, and get back the word you gave. There is not the shortest time to lose."

Knowt was fumbling about his neck; and now, dropping the rod, he tore off his peasant's vest, searched it through, put his hands to his throat again, and then, covering his face, dropped to the ground, sobbing wildly.

Helder stared, speechless.

Suddenly the shepherd sprang to his feet.

"I must go back! I must go back, now! Take me, you who brought me here," he cried fiercely. "Back to the place with the thorn wall about it." His hand clenched. "Take me now! You won't?"

Knowt's fists raised to strike. A moment, and he shrank back, moaning; but Helder had not lifted a finger. He held the shepherd's frightened eyes with his own.

"What meaning has this noise of yours?" he asked coldly.

"My chain," whispered Knowt. "I had it about my neck. What is it comes to one when he touches you?"

"'Your chain,' you said," Helder interrupted. "What chain is that?"

"A little yellow chain with a little yellow cross

hung to it. It was my sister's; she wore it always; and when she was lost to us, I found it hanging on a bush many hills and valleys from our home. I have had it ever since. It may be I could in some way have found her because of it. I cannot go without it, Prince," he ended pitifully.

"When had you it last?"

"This morning I felt it about my neck, and again later when I walked in the big house where no one lives. Prince, let me go back and search for it!"

"How far away is the White Stone?"

"It is far away. Prince——"

Helder's lips tightened.

"Knowt, listen! This is no time for tears—" the Valleylad had again begun to sob. "Listen. You cannot turn back and search for your chain. There is not the time. You must go away from here at once; back to the White Stone, and——"

"Prince!"

"Listen till I have done. You have two days and nights: if in that time you do not go and get back the word you gave, you come forever into a most evil power. That is most surely true."

It seemed to Helder a night-time and a long summer's day that Knowt looked at him.

"You then have no will of your own ever again to seek your sister," he added.

The shepherd's face grew sullen, and he turned away.

"I will go back and I will search through the garden and the big house where no one lives, and if your chain is there, I will find it," said Helder.

"What is it to me that *you* find my chain?"

"I have no wish to keep your chain. You shall have it again. I know your home: if the chain is in the Thorn Palace, I will find it, and either I will bring it to you, or I will send one who can be trusted. He shall put it in your hands. It is my word."

Knowt looked up with a sneer.

"You gave a word before. Did I leave the great house the night I was taken there — as you promised? It was four days—five—I know not how many. 'Your word!' Psh!"

The blood rushed to Helder's head: his face grew crimson.

"I had then no thought that I should be put a prisoner in the tower," he explained. His voice trembled; he could scarcely speak from anger and shame. "So soon as I was free to come to you, I came."

Knowt stood with half-closed, suspicious eyes, a jeer on his lips; and Helder, looking at him, felt all patience give way.

"Choose," he said. "I wait no more. I kept not the first word as I gave it; but I have kept it in so far that you are again free. The second word is for you to take, or leave. Choose. I will not wait: yet, if in two days you are not at the White Stone, you become a servant forever. Choose!"

Knowt's eyes dropped.

"I will take your word, and go," he said; and he stooped for the little rod that lay at his feet.

Helder had not re-entered the Gates before he saw that Fairie Town was in a turmoil. Folk ran hither and thither, wildly, blindly, and the name of "Witch Folk" was on all lips.

"I shall have to tell the King," was his thought, as he sped towards the Palace. "Not of Knowt; for Knowt is no part of that tale; but I shall have to tell what I have learnt of the Witch Maid and the Voice and the power of the Magic Box. That will mean telling of the path through the Thorn Thickets, which will not be pleasant to do, since Rudroon will be angry and the King will be angry and we shall be allowed to go to the Thorn Garden no more. But what can I do? I shall have to tell the King."

He raced on up the wide street. Goldemar's Palace was near; already he was abreast the thornlocked gates of Thorn Rose's deserted home when—with cracklings and slow creakings boughs and gates opened, a flash of lanterns, and in important haste out marched the chief Elf of the Elf-chiefs, a group of Flyers about him.

"My Plume!" thought Helder, stopping. "If they go forever prying there, they may find Knowt's chain before I have a chance to search. I could go now; but I cannot. I can lose no time. I must first

to the King. What can they be doing in there again? The Voice said they would come but once in the evening."

The Elf-chief was speaking.

"At least, if the Witch Maid has for the moment escaped us, we have found her chain. Without it she will doubtless be powerless."

Helder pressed closer and looked. A moment later there were cries of dismay from Chief and Flyers, and Helder, laughing a quick, noiseless laugh, was leaping into the King's Garden.

"That was quick work," he chuckled as he made for the nearest fountain. "Quick work," and he patted the pocket of his Kobold tunic. "So the chain of the lost sister of the shepherd Knowt has become the charm of the Witch Maid," and he laughed again as he washed the salve from hands and face. "That is my greatest luck, that others should find and I should thus easily capture the little yellow chain with the little yellow cross hung to it. Look to it that you leave the salve on your eyelids, stupid," he scolded to himself, "then you will doubtless be able to see the Witch Folk, even though the Elves can see you. And now —it will be no pleasant doing, yet—I must tell the King."

But what was it? When Helder entered the Palace, the King would not see him. There were shouts of welcome and sighs of relief from the Palace Folk; but the King would not see him; and Rudroon dragged

his twin away to a place where they could be alone.

"Helder," he scolded, "this that you do is no jest."

"What is it? I can make no meaning to it all. What ails Fairie Town?"

"Where have you been this while?"

"Later, Rudroon. What ails all Folk and the King?"

"The King rages—at you; at everybody. My Plume! but I know not of which I am most glad, that you were not to be found when sought, or that you have at last appeared. The Guards at the Wall send word that something passes in and out the Town; what, they cannot tell. The King goes down to see; he can see nothing, and his temper is made none the better for it. The Folk about the prison send word that one of the prison-watch would let the Witch Maid out. The King has the watchman Elf cast into the prison and puts the Maid in Thorn Rose's Palace — think you, Helder, the gay time she and the Valleylad can have pulling one another by the hair! The Wall Guards again send word: they are sure something is amiss at the Gates. The King rages the more. He brings out the fiddle—your fiddle; he orders the Witch Maid again to be brought before him; he orders that Prince Helder come, and he swears that if Prince Helder again refuse to play, he, the King, will break fiddle and fiddle-bow over Prince Helder's head."

Helder's lips tightened.

"Then — see how things pile one atop the other! — messengers come a-panting to the King: they cannot find the Prince — Helder, it is over good of me to tell you all this before you tell me what you have done this long while; the Elf-chief and the Flyers who were sent to bring back the Witch Maid come with the word that so soon as they laid hands on her and said, 'You come with us to the King,' she slipped from their fingers and was gone from their sight. They searched and could find her nowhere. It is then plain to see, the King loses his wits: he sends here; he sends there; he forgets to ask more about Prince Helder; he carries the fiddle away — 't is whispered he puts it in the spell-laden middle pillar of the Palace, the safest of all places. A short time since he sent the Flyers to the Thorn Palace to search again. I wonder have they found Knowt within there while they pried about."

Rudroon rubbed his head.

"Helder," he sighed, "it will be but little sport telling the King we put him there, that Knowt."

Helder nodded.

"Yet they will not find Knowt in Thorn Rose Palace. I have this day taken him into the woods beyond Fairie Town, as I promised him I would do."

Before Rudroon could ask the questions that came to his tongue, a messenger came with word that Prince Helder was bid to the Queen; he was to sleep in her room that night.

Helder's lips moved as he walked away.

"The King would break my fiddle on my head," he was whispering. "The King may look to his Fairie Town himself—and the Folk who enter it unknown to him. But, oh, would that I had my fiddle safe in my arms again!"

VII

THE UNSEEN FOLK.

ALONG, long day followed the night, and Helder wandered about alone, burdened with the thought of the Witch Folk, with the loss of his fiddle, and the wonder and dread of what was to come. The King did not send for him; Rudroon eyed him askance, since he would join no sport; they of the Street shrugged their shoulders over him; Kaldah and the Fiddlers were angry with him. There was no joy in life: everything was one miscomfort and weariness.

In the afternoon a sudden thought came to him. "I can make myself unseen, the same as I was yesterday. I can go to the King's inner room, and if he brings out the fiddle, I can take it, as I took the chain yesterday from the hands of the Elf-chief." But anger at himself for such a thought came over him, and he turned away, sighing and wondering what thing there was that was pleasant that he could now do. As for Knowt's chain, that could not wander to the Valley-lands before Knowt had been to the White Stone and had had the time to get him back to his father's home.

When evening began to make ready to come, Helder could stand no more. He wandered away down towards the Old South Gate, and, not knowing what else to do, mounted the high Town Wall and looked out to the woods beyond. It was then that he first saw them slipping from behind the trees, gliding across the open space, and then, slyly, noiselessly, through the Gates into Goldemar's Fairie Town. Gray, bent figures with cloaks that swept the ground and covered their faces. Two, three, of them, and none of the Fairie Folk took heed as they moved up the streets. Now, it was half a dozen that came with gray, trailing cloaks and entered past the bewildered Guards.

Helder felt the chill take hold of him as he lay stretched above looking down on them. He did not move ; he scarcely breathed ; he had thrown his arms across his face that they might not know his eyes could see them. What were they going to do, and how would King Goldemar protect himself against them ? A whole company of them had halted at the edge of the wood. By threes and fours, keen-eyed and quick to turn, they slipped across the open space and entered, a never-ending, gruesome lot, that scattered and disappeared into the Town.

A wilder fright took hold on Helder. The fiddle! His fiddle ! His fiddle ! What had he been doing, dreaming there on the wall this long while, while the Witch Folk passed by below ! They could not only prowl along the streets of Fairie Town ; they could go

to the most inner parts of the Palace ; and, if it were true that the King were trying to learn the art of the fiddle, they could enter where he sat, catch it from his hands, and be off.

Helder leaped from the Wall and began a race for the Palace; but he had scarcely started before he saw standing before him on the Old King's Road, one arm stretched out to bid him stop, Mardah, the Witch Maid.

" Wait! " she cried.

" I cannot : by now they may have the fiddle in their hands! "

" They have not. They have tried, all the night past, and the morning, to take it from the pillar treasure vault, and they cannot. Now, their plan is changed : they will not wait until it may please the King to open the pillar himself."

" Then all is well," said Helder.

Mardah frowned.

" Think you they have but one way to gain their wish ? As many, and more, have entered by other gates as came by this. They gather in the gardens. If you do not come, they go for you. Either you never see Fairie Town again and become servant to them, or King Goldemar gives up the fiddle that he may have back his son."

" Then I never see the fiddle again," gasped Helder.

" What is good for one is good for many," was the quick whisper. " You have the Magic Box. Run-

ning water dashed on them, the salve loses its power. Defend yourself!"

Then she was gone.

Helder stood in the road, stupidly repeating the words. He could make no sense of them. "What is good for one is good for many. Running water. You have the Magic Box." He felt; yes, the Magic Box was safe in his tunic. "What is good for one is good for many——"

Before he fairly knew what he did, Helder was bounding through the Old Town, past ruined houses, through forgotten gardens and broken wickets, over tumbled wall and trellis, to Kaldah's dwelling in the Street of the Cap and Plume.

Luck was with him, for Kaldah was at home and the Fiddlers were there, too. They were talking of Helder, wondering what had come over him, when the Prince burst in upon them.

"Listen you to me!" was his cry. "The Witch Folk have entered Fairie Town! Through all Gates they have come this day. They have searched the Town and the Palace, and have sought to break King Goldemar's treasure vault and carry away the treasure and the fiddle which is kept there. No one in all Fairie Town sees them, or knows that they are here. They cannot break the spell of the pillar, and they cannot wait; so now they have gathered in the Palace Gardens for battle. Who goes to meet them?"

The Fiddlers rose as one Elf.

"Wait you! What good is your strength without sight? Wait till we go equal-matched," and Helder snapped open the little salve box. "Here! Your eyelids; your faces, each one of you; and your hands! It is a Witch Magic, most powerful, and no harm. We become as the Witch Folk: no one of all Fairie Town can see us; but we shall see both Elf and Witch."

With quick fingers he rubbed the salve on hands and faces.

"Now," he cried, "now, to meet them in the King's Gardens!"

Back the way by which he had come, through the ruined city they went, back down the Old King's Road, and over the wall into the lower end of Goldemar's Gardens. They crouched among drooping shrubs, fearful lest after all the Witch Folk should see them first and take them unawares. They crouched and waited; then began creeping forward.

Suddenly, the Kobolds gasped; Kaldah gripped Helder's arm and pointed; Helder nodded and his eyes grew bright. They crept closer.

It was not so hard a matter, for the gray-cloaked company faced the other way: they were turned towards the Palace Gates, and whenever an Elf entered some one of the lot ran forward, stood beside the newcomer, looked him over, and came back shrugging his shoulders. The others crumpled their cloaks, and moved restlessly. It was a wondrous sight to see them moving thus unconcernedly among the Fairies.

Now, two more figures appeared in the Gateway, with raised arms, beckoning. The Witches surged forward. The crew in the shrubberies rose; and there was a bubble of laughter on Helder's lips as he made ready for the rush. The guards at the Gate threw up their lanterns in royal greeting, and Rudroon with Puck and his escort stood in the Gardens.

It happened before one can take the time to tell. The Witch Folk threw themselves upon Rudroon; the Fiddlers threw themselves upon the Witch Folk. Puck and his Kobolds began beating the air with their belts, hitting their unseen Kobold cronies as often as they struck the others. Guards rushed up from all sides and stood dazed. They saw bushes bend and break; they saw the turf trampled; they felt the fanning of the gray mantles as more Witches swept in to the aid of their allies; they heard, unmistakable, the voice of Kaldah, urging unseen Folk to battle; and Prince Helder's laugh rang out in the midst.

Suddenly, Prince Rudroon was snatched from sight, and in the din Helder's voice was again heard calling, "Bring water, you Folk who stand idle. Bring running water from the fountains, and pour it all about."

Screams of rage, wild and shrill, answered this; and those who sprang to do the bidding were hindered, how, they could not tell. Puck found himself clutched as he would have rushed away. He raised his belt: a whirr, a thud, and a something fell at his feet; but, as he again leaped forward, he caught his foot and stum-

bled, and a writhing, twisting something rose, twined about him, choking, smothering him. He tried to cry out; he tried to free himself; he heard a voice far away on the hills, calling, "Their mantles are bewitched! They rise! They spread; they clutch! Water! Quick!"

The next thing Puck remembered Kaldah was helping him to his feet and saying, "Let be! There is need of no more water. See! It is over."

The ground was covered with gray figures; some were bound and writhing; some were stiff and still. The fountains were filling with long gray cloaks that twisted and writhed like the figures on the ground. The Fiddlers were splashing water over themselves at the fountains and calling one to another each to have a care to his eyelids. Rudroon was leaning against a tree, panting and asking, "What is it? What is all this that is done?" And Helder was answering, "It is what you call the curse of the fiddle, and it comes to you because you are my twin. They took you for me, these Folk did."

Helder had a bruise on one cheek; his Kobold vest was torn; one sleeve was gone altogether; and the blood oozed from a gash on his arm. But he smiled as he sat on the fountain basin, and as he looked about him he sighed in thankfulness that the Witch Maid was not among the dead and not among the captured Witch Folk.

THE WITCH'S WORKSHOP

I

A-WANDERING.

"THUS it was."

Helder lay by an upland pool. It was many a mile from Fairie Town: no sound of Elf Folk came to him; and never a Kobold call broke the still air.

"Thus it was," said Helder dreamily. "My lord Goldemar walks in the Palace Garden at home in Fairie Town; my lady the Queen walks at his side. They sit them down where all is still and no Folk come, and they begin to talk. Now, it chances that Kaldah sits astride a limb in the tree that shades them. He sits high that he may see over the wall on one side and on the other to the Palace Gates. He waits for me, as it happens; but that is neither here nor there: what most matters is that he hears their words and when the royal couple are once gone, he hails me into

his house, shuts out the Street, and tells me what he has heard. The King says, ' Madam, this madness of his comes from no making of mine.' The Queen turns rose red and looks away, though that is neither here nor there. ' He is no true Elf,' says the King. My Plume ! I would like to know why I am no true Elf ! I am as much Elf as others," Helder decided crossly.

He threw the stick with which he had been marking into the water, and turned over on his back.

" ' It will not do,' says the King. ' I can have it no more. There shall be an end of the matter.' So Kaldah tells me that it is decided Fairie Town is no safe place for me to stay, since what the Witch Folk have tried once they can try again. By my Kobold belt ! has he not their Witch boxes with which to defend himself against them! He has no longer cause to fear them : they cannot enter Fairie Town unseen again. He took the Witch box from every one of the captured Folk so soon as I told him my tale of the salve's power. He took mine, too," growled Helder. "Glad am I that at least I told no word of our path into Thorn Rose Palace and the things that happened there."

Helder sat up, and, plucking a stone from the bank, cast it into the pool. It sank with a loud noise, and the sound of a pipe which had filled the hill dimple with wailings stopped, as Helder's comrade asked, " What ails you, Prince ? "

" It is nothing," said Helder, lying down again. " I was thinking. Let it not trouble you."

The sound of the pipe began again, and Helder went on with his thoughts.

"Kaldah tells me these things with glee. If I am not to stay in Fairie Town for fear the Witch Folk will spirit me away by other means and thus the fiddle which the Strange Player had will be lost to the Western Hills, why, it follows I go elsewhere. If I go elsewhere, I cannot go alone. Faith, no! I cannot go alone!" repeated Helder with a sidelong glance — the music of the pipe had become as the sound of loud grief mixed with many tears—"and the escort, Kaldah and the Fiddlers, that is, will be called forth to be Prince Helder's bodyguard, as of old. That is Kaldah's tale. It is good to hear. We plan merry runnings and much sport together, and wonder whether Rudroon and Puck and how many Kobolds more will be of the company. Then I am summoned to the King." Helder's face fell. "The King sits in his chair of state, and these words he speaks to me. 'Prince Helder: we like not your ways, your words, your doings these weeks past. You have been a trouble to the Queen, to the King, to the Elf-chiefs, and the whole of Fairie. Think upon this matter.' I thought upon the matter, and it did not make me merry; *but*, were everything to chance again as it did upon that evening when I would not play the fiddle, and I knew I were to lose the fiddle if I did not do the thing which the King wished, *yet* I should not play when men stood about and held a maid so that she could not help but

hear the spell! Then my lord King speaks again. 'It is no longer safe for you to stay in Fairie Town, and it is not safe for Fairie Town to have you here. You therefore go away from us. I shall see to it that others learn to play the tunes you will not use for the good of your King and your clan. A second time it will not be given to you to help where much good and great glory can come of it.' Those were his words; not all of them: for he paused and spoke again. 'But this is not all you have done,' he said. 'You have brought greater danger than this to us,' he said. 'Your likeness to your brother Prince Rudroon puts Rudroon in the danger of being seized by these Folk. So him, too, we must send from Fairie Town.' 'My Plume!' I think to myself; 'then I have done Rudroon no such ill turn, if he gets an outing along with the rest of us.' The King speaks on. 'Go you: take leave of Rudroon; take leave, if you will, of the Crowd in the Street of the Cap and Plume; and come back to me. Your fellow waits: you must be off with him.'"

Helder pressed his lips together and shook his head. It had been no pleasant doing, that taking leave of Kaldah and the Kobolds, and then of Rudroon; telling them that he was going away, where he did not know, with whom he did not know, nor for how long: and that they were not to be of the company.

The wail of the pipe broke up in wild anguish. The player laid it down and sighed. The player was tall

and slim ; he had dream-filled eyes ; and his name was the Piper of Hamel.

"You are dull to-day, Prince," he said. "Would it be your pleasure to journey farther instead of resting here?"

But Helder shook his head.

"One place is as bad as another," he answered wearily.

"How like you the tune, Prince?" the Piper asked after a pause. His hand fondled the reed ; then he laid it against his cheek. "'T is one of my own making——"

"I guessed as much."

"I have spent much time in the learning of it. The trill in the middle has ever a wish to go wrong——"

"That I know."

"And the end—tell me, Prince, you surely must have noticed it——"

"I have—often," sighed Helder.

"Of what does it remind you?"

"Of my most unhappy hour," murmured Helder.

The Piper pondered.

"'T is true," he then said slowly. "There is a sadness in the strain : it has an unhappy way with it. Your most unhappy hour, Prince," he repeated dreamily. "'T is a good name——"

"And true," Helder put in.

"I will call it by that name," the Piper said, and a smile lit up his face.

Helder smiled also. He lay back and put his cap over his eyes; and the Piper looked at him.

"Now I will sing for you," said the Piper.

Helder sat up, and the cap fell off.

"The song about the woodhollow?"

"Yes."

"Then, I pray you, good Piper of Hamel, go up yonder into the willow clump to sing: the melody is one that needs a setting of many trees about it."

The Piper rose.

"I cannot go far into the willow clump, Prince," he explained; "for, if I went far, I could not see you; and King Goldemar your father gave me the command when we left him, that for all the time we were gone I was not to lose the sight of you. Say yourself, have I not done well——"

"Too well," murmured Helder.

"We have been many weeks together, and for all that folk say my wits go to gather fernseed when my pipe is in my hand, my eyes have not lost the sight of you in all that while."

"It is too true, good Piper," Helder agreed; and then the Piper went away to the willow clump and began his song, and Helder stayed behind and cast pebbles into the pool.

"This is wandering," he said to himself bitterly as he sat there with the sun playing about him. "This is what it is to go out and see the earth with a roadfellow of merry heart and voice. The Queen took me

into her arms before I went away and whispered that it would be a great delight, this wandering; that there was much to see and much joy in the seeing and that I would forget I had ever had the Strange Player's fiddle to play upon, or the Witch box to be an ally to me. This mooning Piper of Hamel for a road-fellow, where I have had Rudroon and Puck and Kaldah, the Fiddlers and the Kobold Crowd; these dim woods, these glades and upland hills to wander in—have I not wandered in such glades as these before—and in better company? We speak with no one, we see no one; I am clad as a lad of the Valleylands that none may think me come from the Western Hills, or Fairie Town. And this jolly comrade of mine who talks of nothing but his maudlin pipe and the maudlin songs he makes himself! He does that, or he hints that King Goldemar has given him certain power over me, to use if it should be I wished to do something which he, the Piper, thinks should not be done: and then he smiles his fool's smile and plays his windfilled melodies on his wheezy marshland reed, and never takes his sleepy, moonstruck, watchful eyes from off of me!"

Helder's hands clenched themselves in the grass.

"One of these days I shall become most mightily angry," he muttered between his teeth, "and then—then!"

He fell to thinking of the days when he and his fiddle had been free of the earth, with only Rudroon to counsel and complain; and he fell asleep with the

song of the Piper of Hamel droning in his ears. On and on and on went the song of the Piper, and the wind mixed with it and the rustle of leaves; and the rustle of leaves grew, and birds began to sing. But the birds stopped singing and the Kobold Crowd swept by in Helder's dream, and he heard his name called many times, but he could not answer, nor follow: and the cries died away on the hills. Then the birds began again to sing, and Helder heard a laugh; and he awoke, and the pool lay before him in the dimple of the hills, and the hill shadows stepped across it; and it was evening. And he was looking straight into the eyes of Mardah, the Witch Maid; and, as he looked at her, the Witch Maid laughed again.

"How come you here?" gasped Helder. "What do you here?" He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and looked around. "Where has the Piper gone?"

"If it is the stupid comrade of yours who can do nothing but moon and blow into a pipe you ask about, he tears his hair and has gone asearching you up and down the Valleys."

Helder looked bewildered.

"While you slept I put Witch salve, a double lot, upon you, so that he could not see you," the Witch Maid explained demurely; "and him—from him I took his stolen Witch box——"

"But he could see me for all that!" gasped Helder.

"That is true: they who have once had Witch salve upon their eyelids can always see those made

invisible by the salve. But there are ways to bewilder the mind," Mardah added wisely. "I have heard tell of a famous poppy potion——"

Then she laughed outright.

"Do you want him back again?" she asked.

"Not I," laughed Helder, resting his head on his hand and looking at her. "Why did you do it?"

"I did it for two causes," Mardah said slowly. "First, because — because — I know not which comes first and which comes second—but you did not seem over happy with your moon-eyed, lynx-eyed Piper; and then, Prince — I have need of you," she ended, half frightened, in a rush of words.

Helder rose.

"What can I do for you?" he asked with grave courtesy; but she shook her head and pointed to his seat on the grass.

"No; not yet. Not yet, Prince. I wanted first to ask you why—why you would not do as the King, your father, bid? Why would you not witch me with the fiddle that day?"

The blood rushed to Helder's face.

"Did you not know you had me in your power?"

He nodded.

"You could have learnt many things from me, and I could not have helped myself. It is the power of the fiddle. Did you not know?"

Again he nodded.

"Then, why would you not play?" she insisted, eying him curiously. Helder's face turned redder than ever.

"Had I done that thing," he stammered at last, "had I done that thing, I had been no better than the Strange Player—Mardah"; and for a space there was silence between them.

Then Helder again rose to his feet.

"You said you had need of me?" he asked.

Mardah's face was bent low over the grasses.

"Have you given back the little gold chain to Knowt, the shepherd lad?" she asked.

"No," he answered, staring. "Are you all places at once that you should know of that? And what has that to do with your need?" he added when she did not answer.

"This," said Mardah. She sprang up, and her breath came fast. "This. You know Knowt. The sister whom he has been seeking has been the while with us, and could not get away. She is stupid past belief; also, she has been frightened. She should sit all day and spin by a window in some Valley Bauernhof, and never go beyond sight of her village. That is the life for her — not ours. They thought to use her; but," Mardah shook her head, "she can do nothing. I doubt she has lost her wits from fear. Would you see her? Come!"

Mardah led the way between boulders to the other side of the pool, where a girl lay hidden, huddled in

the shade of a rock, mumbling and muttering and picking at the sand with wandering fingers.

Helder looked at her. There was likeness to the shepherd lad of the Valleylands in her white, pinched face : she could well be his sister.

" Was she struck with the fiddlebow ? " he whispered.

" No : but,"—Mardah shrugged her shoulders—" you can see. She is muddle-brained for all that."

" What do you here with her ? "

" I have been sent. Since I last saw you," here Mardah smiled quickly, " she has been gone a long while——"

" She ? " Helder pointed to Knowt's sister.

" No. The Witch Dame. Two days ago she came back. She has been far: I can tell by the scent of her mantle. She brought with her a strange phial with a strange drink within, such as we have not. She said its power was to change the stupid and make them as other people ; and she sent me away with the phial and the Valley girl here. The Valley girl is to drink a certain part of it, and when she has drunk, I am to take her back again, that she may at last be of use to us. But," the Witch Maid raised a warning finger, " if I lose the phial, or if I waste so much as one drop more than there is need for the girl to drink, then—" Mardah's eyes flashed. " She has many ways of hurting, has the Witch Dame."

" Why did she not come herself, if so much care

must be taken with the potion?" Helder asked scornfully.

Mardah's lips curled.

"The Witch Dame is afraid."

They stared down at the Valley girl, and the more Helder looked, the more puzzled he grew.

"And where comes your need of me in this?" he asked at last solemnly. "Am I to hold the girl while you pour the potion between her lips, that she may change from stupid and become a help to the evil Witch Folk? Or am I to pour while you hold her?"

Mardah frowned.

"It is neither," she said coldly. "I cannot leave her, or I should go myself. It is her brother. None could have helped her before: she was always watched. If I could, I would get her brother here: he would take her away."

Helder's face lightened. He slapped his cap on his head.

"Where is her brother?" he asked quickly. "I have his chain with me. I kept it when we went away, instead of giving it to others to take to him; for I thought we might go to the Valleylands, and then I could put it myself into his hands and be sure. But it was not in the mind of the Piper to go to the Valleylands—and we did not go," Helder added grimly. "Where is her brother? Did he reach the White Stone in the rock-wall in time?"

"Yes: but now, who knows where his muddled brain has taken him!"

"How do you know that he reached the stone before his hour was gone?"

"Anyone could tell that, Prince. She raved, the Witch Dame did, when she came back and found where the stone had been struck by the rod and where the rod had been left lying——"

"Then he did everything aright to free himself from her power?"

"Yes; for that he had wit enough."

"My Plume! Speak not to me!" cried Helder excitedly. "You saw him yourself, and had words with him: else he had never come safely away from the place."

Mardah blushed.

"That is not of what we spoke, Prince."

Helder laughed.

"My Plume! It is," he declared. "Tell me what he did."

Then Mardah laughed with him.

"I found Knowt by the White Stone," she said. "I travelled quickly for fear others should be before me. He had beaten upon the rock and said his words and placed the rod where it should be put: and then the witless one had sat him down to wait till the old woman with the black mark on her cheek should come again, for he had a mind to ask her where he should next go to search for his sister!"

Mardah's eyebrows went up, and Helder laughed again.

"I told him my thought of him and sent him off. I said I would help him if I could—and if he were not so dull that he would hinder me; and I bade him once every dark moon season come to a certain place, that I might have word with him if I chose. Twice we met, and I had naught to say. What could I say? Should I tell him, 'I know and have always known where your sister is; her wits are like gone from sorrow and fright; I cannot get her to you, and you cannot reach her'? The third time I could not leave. Now, the fourth time comes around: he may, and he may not be at the place of meeting——"

She looked at Helder and waited. Helder straightened his cap, and cast a glance around, as though to fix the spot in his mind; then he looked at the Valley girl.

"You would have him here?" he asked, and Mardah nodded.

"Where is the place of meeting?"

She fumbled in her skirt, and brought something to light.

"This will guide you," she whispered; but Helder looked, felt the leaden knobs at either end, and cast the rod on the ground.

"That grew in King Goldemar's Hazel Copse! I have no need of your stolen Witch sticks," he said in contempt, and the Witch Maid flushed. "I am not a

muddle-brained Valleylad—for all I may look it in this fool's garb — that I should need such a thing to guide me. Tell me where the meeting-ground lies from here; and, if the shepherd lad be roundabouts, I will find him and bring him back to you."

II

KNOWT'S SISTER.

"PRINCE, you did not find him?" Mardah spoke in alarm. "And to-day is the third day, and I can wait no more. You had done better had you come back at once: then, if you would have watched, I might have slipped away, even for a short time, and searched. Now, there is nothing to do but to try the potion; and the Wise Woman alone knows whether death, or life is hid in it."

The corners of her mouth drooped, and she put her hands to her head; but Helder smiled and frowned and pointed behind him.

"You are over-ready to believe all but yourself witless, Witch Maid. Your Knowt is behind yonder. He comes dragging a pony which will not go, that his sister may ride home atop of it, and he has clothes for her to put on, that she may not have the curse of Witch clothes about her when he takes her away."

Mardah threw up her head.

"There is naught about her clothes to be feared: but where is he?"

"Behind, at the foot of the hill yonder: the pony

lies in the mud of the stream and finds the place to its mind. Knowt beats the beast, and wails because the clothes came near to floating away."

"The clothes—" Mardah looked curious. "Whence did he take the clothes? Had he them with him when he came to the place of meeting?"

"Not he: he had nothing with him—not even his head. Where is his sister?"

"She sleeps yonder where you last saw her. How did he get the clothes?"

"He got no clothes. 'T is I went for them; for that reason I was so long returning. Ah, the beast rises at last,"—there were shrill cries and the sound of blows from the gorge below; "now the affair will shortly be over, for which let us both give thanks. As I say, I found your Knowt——"

"Not *my* Knowt, Prince!"

"I found 'not-your-Knowt' in the place which you described to me and where you said he would not be. I gave him the little gold chain with the little gold cross to it, as I had promised; and his words were bitter because I had not brought it before. Then, I gave your message, which he did not believe; and he called me choice names for trying to put him again behind a thorn wall where he would be most unhappy—if he were the fool to go there! That lasted till he was weary and I said that if he did not come willingly, I should beat him and then drag him to the place where you and his sister waited."

"Prince! Surely——"

Helder drew up his shoulders.

"'T is sad; but what would you? It is the only thing that brings his wits to my way of thinking. Then he whines that he must go back to his father's house and get his sister fit garb to wear—as I have already told—I pray you, think the days it had taken his slow feet to go and come back again! He will not budge until he has the clothes; so we agree I go and get the clothes and he goes on the way I tell him towards the place where his sister waits for him: we were to meet in a hollow where two streams join. I made for the house where the witless granny lived—she lives there no more—I found the clothes and came away back to the two streams. No Knowt! I hide the clothes in a tree and go asearching. I find him three valleys away; he chases a pony, and can find none to his wish. When he sees me, and without a bundle, he raves me about broken words and the thorn wall, through which he swears he will never again be dragged. I have heard such speech before." Helder's face clouded, and he bit his lip. "It was not pleasant. Now he is down yonder, he and the pony—and the clothes; and now, I hope we have come to the end with him. Can he find his way home again, or am I to——?"

Over the brow of the hill Knowt came into sight, mud-bedaubed and angry, dragging a sullen-eyed pony after him.

"Do you two stand aside!" was his curt order, when the pony was once fastened and they had taken him to the rock where his sister lay, turning and moaning in her sleep.

"And why should we two stand aside?" Mardah asked tartly, as Helder stepped back.

"You are evil dreams, both of you: her eyes must never again rest on you, or any of your kind. You are less than useless. You are evil dreams. Stand aside!"

The Witch Maid looked at him in sudden anger. Then she laughed.

"'T is the way of mortals," she said, and turned to Knowt, who was kneeling at the girl's side and had laid his fingers on her hands.

"You, Valleylad, wait!"

Knowt looked up, scowling.

"If we are evil dreams, you had best take from her the power ever again to see the dreams as they pass her by. The seeing might do her a harm."

Knowt seized the sleeping girl's hands in his, while Mardah, kneeling on the other side, flashed a crystal phial against the sun, then with moving lips dripped drops on the fluttering lids.

A moment later the girl opened her eyes, looked about her, and sat up, shivering. Knowt held his breath and waited; the other two stood aside and watched.

Suddenly her two arms went around her brother's neck.

"This is a very strange place, Knowt," she said anxiously. "Is it not, Knowt?"

"No," her brother said stoutly. "It is not a strange place; but we have been here long enough, and you have slept long enough. We will now go home," he said, and he lifted her to her feet. "You had best put on the other clothes we brought," he said —the two that watched could hear him choke between the words—"these have grown worn and muddy."

His sister nodded.

"Yes: I had better put on the other clothes we brought," she agreed, repeating his words like a child.

"And leave these here?" suggested Knowt.

Again she nodded.

"Yes. We will leave these here."

"I have an apple for you to eat, and a horse for you to ride as we go home," he told her; and she laughed a little, uncertain laugh.

"But where are your sheep?" she asked, taking her slim arms from about his neck, and looking around.

Knowt pointed down the hill.

"The sheep have already started," he said. "Come! I will go behind that rock; do you put on the other clothes, that we, too, may start for home."

Then he turned, scowling, to Mardah and Helder.

"Go away, you two," he said savagely. "There is no need of you. Go away!"

They watched the pony, the little figure atop, and the sturdy fellow trudging at its side, go down the hill,

"THEY WATCHED THE PONY, THE LITTLE FIGURE ATOP."

across the stream, and out of sight; and then the Prince of the Western Hills and the Witch Maid faced one another.

"That is done," said Helder.

"Yes," echoed Mardah. "Yes; that is done."

Her eyes dropped, and she began digging with the point of her shoe in the earth.

"What will you do now?" Helder asked.

She drew up her shoulders, and spread out her hands.

"I go to the place from which I came."

"What will you say when they ask where is the one who should have come with you?"

Mardah pressed her lips together.

"There are many things I could say," she answered shortly. "I can go back and say that I gave the potion and that it straightway killed her."

"Your Witch Dame will come to find the body, to see if you speak the truth," objected Helder.

"I can say that she threw herself into the pool here, and that the pool dragged her under and she did not rise again. Or I can say that when she took the potion, she burst into a thousand pieces and not one was large enough to find."

Helder shook his head, considering.

"I know not how it is with your Folk," he said soberly; "but with us, if one were to come telling such an old woman's tale, he would not be believed; and it would fare hard with him. To whom do you go? The Witch Dame? What manner of person is

she? Has she even the smallest kindness in her heart?"

Mardah laughed shortly.

"You heard her voice that day when you came to Thorn Rose Palace and she went away without having seen you. Let that speak to you of her kind heart!"

"The Evil Voice!" cried Helder. "And you saw me there! And did not tell her! But that has nothing to do with this matter. If she does not believe you, or if she comes to find out what you have done, it will go ill with you."

"Yes," said the Witch Maid, staring ahead of her. "It will go ill with me."

Helder's face grew more solemn than ever.

"I doubt it will go more than ill with you, if one were to judge from the evil which speaks in the voice of the Evil Voice."

Mardah brought a second phial from her pocket, a long, slim phial with a shining top to it. Through the crystal a liquid flashed, red, changing to purple; rich colours, but with an uncanny look to them.

"This is the potion; the Witch Dame brought it from over seas," the Witch Maid said, holding it to the light.

"It has an evil look," Helder said.

"The Witch Dame fears it," said Mardah.

"Why?"

"We have never had its like among us; and she does not know it; and in truth she does not know

what it will do ; and she does not surely trust the one who gave it her."

" Are you sure ? " asked Helder quickly ; and Mardah as quickly answered.

" I know. I have told you that she said to me it was of a power to make a great change in the stupid, that it held no danger and for me to take it and go without fear ; but at night when she thought none waked to hear her, she mumbled, over fire and kettle, saying, ' Can I trust it ? Can I not trust it ? ' And one came a-visiting, and urged that the potion be tried there and at once : but she would not, for she said that the Wise Woman of Earth had an evil look in her eye and she did not know of a certain what the potion would do. It might be the death of him who took and her who gave and all that stood near a-watching——"

Mardah balanced the phial in her hand.

" What had best be done ? " she whispered to herself, yet Helder heard her words. " I think I had best pour on the ground that part which I was to give the girl, and then go back—back——"

But Helder took the bottle from her.

" I know a better plan than that, Mardah," he said.

III

THE NEW THEKLA.

"FASTER! All of you!" called a voice into the gloom, and the white-clad figures hurrying to and fro between fire and niche moved quicker still. "Faster! Do you think I keep you to sit at ease and watch the flames change light? You sleep and talk and idle the time away while I am gone: you shall pay for it now that I am again here. Faster!"

"Three days, and a day and a night," muttered the hag, as she bent over a fire where a kettle rocked to its bubbling. "It is the time and over that she should be back again. If by midnight there is no return, I must send someone to see. No," she whined, lifting the kettle from the fire, "I must go myself. It cannot be otherwise: I must go myself," and she shuddered.

"Faster, you who loll behind there: the work is not half done, and the day moves on."

The mouth of the cave was wide, and a broad band of sunshine stretched across its opening. Above, somewhere, and out of sight, one heard the twitter of birds; but one looked out on no meadow-land, or

greenwood ; for at twenty paces a grim, bare wall rose before the cave, and on stepping out one saw nothing but high, bare rock on either hand and under foot a bit of bare, narrow path that curved sharply to one side and disappeared. Looking into the cave, it seemed a place that had no end. Gloom, darkness, blackness : but here a low-placed fire, there another and another, made unsure glimmering ; and the arches, the walls, and galleries which those fires lighted with fitful gleam stretched back endless into the dark of the mountain-side.

" Faster ! " croaked the old woman. She had the black Witchmark high on one cheekbone. " Faster ; or——"

There came a knock, a quick, strange rapping three times over, and the old woman called that one go out and open.

Outside in the path between the walls there was heard the patter of feet, and one by one new figures staggered into the cave, great bundles on their heads and in their arms and on their backs. They dropped the bundles to the floor and opened them ; and the place filled with the scent of herb and flower, the breath of the woods and the damp of moss near brook and waterfall. They who worked in the back of the cave ran forward and fell to sorting the fragrant piles, and those who had come in helped, and the old woman stood over them and grumbled when a flower had been crushed, or a stem bruised : and

between whiles she kept muttering to herself, "She does not come! She does not come! I shall have to go and search—I and no other. It is a dreadful hour! I wonder, are they both dead."

The last sunbeams lifted from the wall; in the gloom the fires brightened; overhead the twitter of birds stopped; but other sounds were heard outside there beyond the steep, bare wall—snatches of song, clear calling of wares, and laughter. Then came a grating noise, a rumble, and the thud of something heavy closing. The path filled with voices, voices and laughter, and a bevy of girls came trooping into the cave. They, too, cast bundle and basket on the floor; they cast copper and silver coin to the old woman; and they threw themselves down beside the outer fire. They were happy, these; the cave echoed to their songs, and hollow laughter sounded in far-off corners in answer to their own. The others back there in the dark worked on; but the old woman had stopped her threats, and sat by the cave entrance. Now and then she put a question to one of the newcomers, and forgot to listen to the answer.

At last—was that what she waited for?—outside from the dusk came a call like the trill of a bird at dawn; and the Witch Dame rose with a cry. Again the grating noise, the rumble, and the thud; and Mardah, the Witch Maid, stood at the mouth of the cave, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining.

"What came of it? You are alone? She died?" questioned the Dame breathless, drawing her aside.

Mardah shook her head, and her eyes grew brighter still.

"I am not alone." She pressed something into the withered hand that was stretched out to her. "Here," she whispered quickly. "Here is your potion, the rest of it. The wonder of it is great. See what it has done!"

Then, turning, she called back into the pathway.

"There is nothing to fear. It is as I tell you. Come."

There were slow steps; a pause; more steps: and a second figure came to the cave entrance and looked in.

The Witch Dame stared. Then her mouth fell. Then she grew angry.

"What is this you bring me?" she asked sharply. "Whence have you this maid? And where is Thekla, the girl from the Valleylands?"

"There!" said Mardah in a low voice, pointing. The girl had entered the cave and stepped up to the fire. "It is the magic of the potion which you gave. That is Thekla."

The Witch Dame stared again, muttering.

"Her look is not at all like Thekla; or any of those who come from the Valleylands."

Mardah shrugged her shoulders.

"She does not know the Valleylands. She knows nothing but what one tells her. It is the power of the potion: she has forgotten the past."

"I cannot understand," whispered the Witch Dame.

"I cannot understand it," and her evil-thinking little eyes followed the gaze of this new Thekla, who was slowly looking about.

It was as though this Thekla did not see the crowd that had gathered around her and was whispering and pointing at her, open-mouthed.

"Get you gone from about here," growled the Dame. "Go back where you belong — all of you! Away!"

The whispering and the laughter stopped; the Witch Maids scattered and disappeared. In the background the white-clad figures worked on. Thekla took no notice and did not move; and the Witch Dame looked at her with a wondering shake of the head.

"Now, Mardah, sit you there and tell me what happened."

Mardah sat down, clasped her knees, and began her tale.

"We went away as you said. It was slow work, for she was often tired and would lie down and sleep: and when she waked again she would not speak. Then, at last, when we were beyond the farthest ridges where the herb-gatherers work, then I gave her the drink——"

"How did you give it?"

"As you told me: not otherwise."

"Not one drop more?"

"Not one drop more," Mardah answered steadily; and the lean, trembling fingers that held the phial raised it towards the flame.

"Go on; go on. What then? You gave her the drink. Speak! What then?"

Mardah's eyes were following the other figure.

"It is most strange," she said slowly. "I have never seen the like before. No sooner had she taken the drink than she fell to the ground. I thought I had killed her."

The Witch Dame leaned forward breathless.

"Next—" the Witch Maid took a deep breath and clasped her hands closer about her knees—"next——"

"Well? 'Next'? How long will it be between your words?"

"I dropped three drops beside her on the ground—as you said."

"Yes. Yes. And then?"

"No sooner had the drops touched the ground than a scent such as I have never smelt before — and may I never smell its like again—filled the air; and straightway out of the ground came a strange blackness, like a cloud, yet not a cloud; like fog, yet not fog. One could not see into it; one could not touch it: and yet it touched and pushed out and around, until it pushed me as far away from where she fell as is from here to the wall out yonder. There it stood, that blackness; and I looked at it; I walked about it: it was the same on all sides. If one went to touch it, one touched nothing: if one tried to walk against it, one could not. Within, there was not a sound; and I waited that

night—it was evening when I gave the drink — the next day I waited and the next night——"

"Would I had been there," sighed the Witch Dame.

"And when the second morning came, of a sudden with the first sunbeam the blackness, the wall, whatever it may have been, vanished. The spot was as though the wall had never been there; and in the place where she had fallen two nights and a day before there she still lay, but changed — so!" and Mardah nodded towards the girl, who was bending over a pile of herbs, picking at them, smelling them, and dropping them to look at others.

"What did she do?" whispered the Witch Dame.

Mardah unclasped her hands, and smoothed her hair.

"She lay on the ground with her eyes closed; but when I touched her, she opened her eyes and sat up and stared at me."

Mardah rubbed her forehead.

"It was passing strange to look into black eyes where before one had looked at blue, and to see short, black hair where before it had been long and yellow."

"What did she say?" asked the Witch Dame with a deep breath.

"She said nothing, save when I questioned her, and then, that her name was Thekla, and she was a Witch Maid"—the Dame cackled out in a sudden laugh—"The Valleylands? She had never heard of the Valleylands. Her brother Knowt? She had no brother Knowt. The Witch Cave? She had never

been in the Witch Cave, but my word of it sounded as though it were of all places the only place to live."

The Witch Dame raised her hands, speechless.

"I asked her what she had been doing all the years since she had lived, and she said——"

A sudden knocking beyond there on the other side of the wall. This noise did not sound of skill, or long usage. It came loud and heavy; the beats were too many in number and the manner of rapping was wrong. It was twice repeated, and a rain of blows followed.

The Witch Dame rose and struck her staff upon the ground. The fires, all but the one by the entrance, vanished. The white-clad, hurrying figures dropped their work and stood like stone. Mardah jumped back, and motioned Thekla not to move. There was the grating sound of opening rock, a deep voice thundering angry words; and a man strode into the cave.

"You are early, friend," the Witch Dame said coldly.

"That is as you take it. I have waited long enough. Now, I wait no more!" He looked about fiercely. "You know for what I come. You have had your pay. Give me my due."

The Witch Dame bent over the bubbling kettle and raised its cover. Then she shook her head.

"It is not ready. You must come again."

"Not I. The road from the Valleylands is far. I wait."

He settled himself on the stool where the Witch Dame had sat, thrust out one leg, put an elbow upon his knee, and looked up at her, jeering.

"I wait until I have that for which I have paid. Cook you your brew and let it cool. You should have done it before."

"You cannot wait here."

"That we shall see."

He threw back his cloak and crossed his arms over his chest. The Witch Dame stood behind her fire and eyed him long and steadily. He looked at her and saw nothing else; but others who also stood behind the fire could see a figure cross towards her, then glide away to one of the galleries, come back to the Dame again, and disappear.

Again the Witch Dame bent over the kettle.

"How long do I wait?" sneered the man; but she motioned him to be still.

"How long——"

But a motion angrier than the last checked him: she was waving her staff and muttering. Suddenly the kettle overturned; there was a clatter and a hiss; and the Dame straightened up, flashing a phial in her hands. The man jumped to his feet, overturning the stool; but she waved him away, and passed the phial three times across the fire before she gave it him.

He looked at it, felt it, and put it in his breast.

"If this does not make an end of the matter, you will hear from me—and to great purpose," he growled.

Then he threw a gold coin at her feet. "Had you given it to me when I first asked, you had had more. Now, show the way out of your den," and, folding his cape about him, he stepped from the cave.

The Witch Dame followed him.

She was back again in a minute; but already the fires had flamed up into their places and the workers of the Witch Cave were gliding to and fro.

"What was the thing that Thekla said when you asked what she had been doing all the years that she had lived, Mardah?" the Witch Dame asked, resettling herself on her stool. "Would I had been there instead of you! I should have let other work wait; I should have gone myself"—Mardah turned her head away to hide a smile—"What was it?"

But Mardah shook her head.

"The thing is not for me. I do not understand. Ask her."

"Call her, then;" but when the new Thekla came and stood before the mistress of the cave, the Witch Dame looked uncertain and did not speak.

"Ask her where she was before she came here," prompted Mardah in a whisper.

She slipped behind the Witch Dame's stool, and looked at Thekla, and caught her lip in her teeth as the Witch Dame put the question.

Thekla looked at one fire and another and another; then her eyes came back to the Witch Dame's. Unconcerned, indifferent eyes they were; dull; yes, dull;

stupid even, for all they were no longer eyes of the Valleylands.

"I was in a dark house," Thekla answered dreamily. "For a long time I lay on the floor. No one was there——"

"Mardah, can it be she speaks of the wall which grew from the three drops which you dropped upon the ground!"

"No one was there," Thekla repeated dreamily. "But there came someone and whispered to me——"

"Mardah!"

"I walked about the wall many times," Mardah whispered, bending over the Witch Dame's shoulder, "and none came near the place."

"Someone came and whispered to me," Thekla went on slowly, "and said——"

Again a knock echoed into the cave, a stranger's knock; but this one was faint, and the Dame rose grumbling.

"Is there to be no peace to-night?" she muttered, striking her staff on the ground. "What was it that someone said to you, Thekla, when you lay in the dark house?"

"She said, 'When you come to the Witch Dame, speak these words to her. Say: "Do not touch me, and let none other touch, or handle me, that the power of the potion may not be lost."'"

A faltering step was heard in the path; and Mardah jumped behind the fire and dragged the new Thekla

after her. Already all other fires were gone and deep silence filled the cave.

A woman appeared at the doorway; her garb was coarse; she had a handkerchief tied over her head, and carried a bundle in one hand. She grasped the edge of the cave and stood at the threshold, trembling.

"What do you want?" frowned the Witch Dame.

"I have come," stammered the woman. "I was told—I have come——"

"Well? What is it? Speak, or begone. My time is not yours to waste."

"It is but a small matter," the woman began hurriedly. "They say you know more than anyone else, that you are the only one who can help me. I have a child, a little girl," her voice broke in a sob; "the child is gone. They say you can tell me where she is; so I have brought—" her trembling fingers worked at the knots of the bundle as she drew near the fire and the Witch Dame—"copper and silver and one piece of gold. I have been saving them for years. It is all I have, and it is yours: only let me——"

But as she held out the coins, the handkerchief slipped from her head; the fire lit up her face; and shrill outcry arose from the back of the cave.

"Mother! mother! Come!"

"My child! It is her voice! You have her!" The woman had hurled herself forward and was struggling in the clutch of the Witch Dame. "There is the coin. Take it; but the child is mine. Give her——"

The woman was whirled away. In a moment the Witch Dame was back again and her mantle fanned the flames aside as she made for the back of the cave.

"Shall I stand by and see that done!"

"Prince, are you mad?" Mardah seized the speaker and drew him back. "Have we told our tale and passed its dangers to have you undo work and planning before you have been here an hour? You cannot help. Had she not cried out it would not have happened. They must not speak: it is a law. You cannot help. Let be."

And the shrieks of the Valleychild died away down a far-off gallery.

IV

LIFE AT THE CAVE.

THERE followed a time such as Helder had never dreamed could be; he became part of the life of the great cave, and learnt of the doings in the Witch's Workshop. First, days upon days of the rush of work with the captured Valleychildren: late evenings and early mornings; the sorting of piles of strange-scented herbs, the hurrying between caldron and niche with steaming pot and flashing phial, the carrying of water from a spring back yonder in the darkest dark of the mountain. And the Witch Dame was over all, urging the work on.

None of the white-clad Valleychildren seemed to know the other; none spoke with the other, not even if the Witch Dame chanced to be away; and if Helder whispered, asking what was the name of this white flower with the sick sweet scent, or of this crimson one that turned the water to black when it came to the pot; or what was the use of this drink they were making when finished, a white, drawn face was lifted to his, and the answer was, "I do not know." If

he pointed to the strange tracings that covered the walls in many places and asked the meaning of the faint, weird signs, the answer was always the same, "I do not know"; and they bent to their work again. They waited only for the late evening hour when the Witch Dame drove them through dim passages to a gallery where she waved the Sleep Spell over their tired bodies and they were left in peace for the short night.

Those few hours became to Helder the strangest and the happiest of his new life. Mardah had given him before they came to the Witch Cave a something to put in his shoes which made his step light as that of the Witch Folk and himself as hard to be seen; the Sleep Spell, made for Valleychildren, held no charm for him: and when the Dame's steps had died away, out he came. Once or twice he was nearly caught, and then he would stay in the Sleep Gallery for a night or two; but that never lasted long. He was soon away again to prowl about till dawn. He slipped through many a winding passageway and down many a distant gallery; but he found no end to the great cave. Beyond there was always a flicker of fire near the floor, or the gleam of crystal from some unseen wall. Or else, if all were dark and one thought the end was surely come, there were knockings, or far-off calls, footsteps, and faint laughter; and he turned back, for Mardah had told him, out on the hillside, that if he came among them he could not be too

careful ; and he had no wish to lose his life among the Witch Folk : he wished to know their secrets.

But he could learn nothing. There was no way to unravel their mysteries. He never saw Mardah, for she did not come among the Valleychildren ; and night after night he tiptoed down endless passages, listening to far-off sounds and wondering what was the secret of the life about him.

One night as he stood in an out-of-way corner, puzzling over a new set of tracings on the wall, a hand was laid on his arm and Mardah's voice breathed behind him, " Quick, Prince ! Quick ! Back to where they sleep ! " and before he fairly knew what was happening, she had dragged him away, through one door, two, and three—a path he had never seen before —and pressed him down among the children with the order, " Let happen what will, do not move, or open your eyes."

A moment later the Witch Dame was heard in the wide gallery.

" I have searched twice over and cannot find her."

And a peevish, high-pitched voice answered, " It was a myth, then, you told us, good sister, the trip to the Wise Woman of Earth, the treasure you had from her, and the marvel it worked on the girl you were going to kill, because," a high, thin laugh, " she was too stupid for the herb pickers, even."

And then Mardah's cool tones broke in: " Here she lies in the corner."

Helder felt the breath of someone who bent over him. Then, a hand was laid upon him, and the peevish voice drawled, "Let us see. Let us see. The Sleep Spell holds her. Let us——"

But the Witch Dame interposed.

"Let be! She must not be touched! It is the word of the Wise Woman. She must not be handled, that the power of the potion be not lost. Come back."

The shadow passed from across his face; but the visitor grumbled as they moved away.

"All I say is this: If it be true she does not tire and has wit beyond her kind who huddle here, the more fool you, good sister—I fear me you grow old that the thought has not long ago come to your mind—the more fool you not to teach her. There are places where there are but few who *can* help; and those few grow proud of their knowledge——"

Here Mardah's laugh broke in upon the scolding, and then all grew still.

The next day Helder was sent into the woods with the green-clad company whom he had seen staggering back to the cave each night; and there followed long days of herb-gathering on hillsides, or in deep, damp mountain gorges that never saw the sun. It was a pleasant thing to do: but it was maddening, since he learnt no more than he had learnt before; for these, too, were silent Valleychildren, girls and boys, and they knew not the reason of things.

Sometimes, as they trudged back in the twilight, he

would ask, now one, now another of them, "Do you like this life in the Witch Cave and on the hills?"

"No."

"Then why do you not stop gathering these herbs and run away?"

"I cannot."

"Why can you not?" Helder would question curiously; and the answer was always the same, "I do not know": and they would hurry on to the tall, flat wall of rock and the White Stone in the mountain-side, to rap the rap of the herb-gatherers and slip in through the magic rock-door into the narrow pathway that led to the Witch Cave.

At night they, too, were driven to a gallery, and the Sleep Spell was spoken over them.

But the herb-gathering came to an end, as the sorting and brewing had done.

One afternoon as he crouched in deep moss beside a trickle of stream, seeking fairy fern, his bundle was snatched from under his fingers and tossed to another gatherer nearby, and a voice called into the stillness, "Here, you, Valleylad, add this to your pile; and you, Witch-changed Valleygirl, you follow me."

It was one of the Witch Maids—he knew that by her dress—and she was down the gorge and halfway up a steep hillside before he had risen from his knees. Up the hillside, through tangled thicket, over highplaced boulder and fallen treetrunk, to the brow of the hill; and Helder smiled when he stepped to her side and

saw her start of wonder; for the pace had been swift and the path was hard. On down the crest of the hill until they left the woods behind and came out upon a ledge with a wide view on lower hills that dropped to farspread plains below.

Here they were hailed by a knot of maids such as went singing back to the cave at night, to lie around the fire, laughing and chattering with the ill-tempered Dame—Witch Maids, all of them; and one bore on her cheek the faintest shadow of the Witch Mark.

They made indignant outcry when they saw who it was whom their comrade had with her.

"By the cave fires! What is this you bring us?"

"Could you do no better than that?"

"Is this madness of yours, or of the Witch Dame's?" asked a dozen angry voices.

"Is the blame mine?" the other cried. "It is the Witch Dame's doing. She is in a nice rage, as it is, to have this work thrust upon her of a sudden — it is an order from within, I take it—when she had not planned for it. None of our kind are near the cave, even; and there is not the time to wait their coming. The Dame told me to take this one on the way and be off."

"But Mardah? Where is she?"

"She is behind, helping the Dame."

"But this one here: she will only hinder us. She will stumble; she will fall, or cry out. She cannot keep the pace; or, if she does, she will surely be caught below."

Then she of the shadowy Witch Mark spoke.

"We talk no more; and we wait no more. Our work is down yonder in the hemp fields. If she keeps not the pace, she falls behind. You, Valleygirl, follow if you can."

They were fleetfooted, and that was the truth. Their pace was the pace of the Kobold Crowd, and they did not stop to rest. Helder felt his old, happy self return as they dropped from the hills and he moved in the rush of them.

The sun was still shining when they reached the plains. It was setting when they halted in a willow clump by the edge of a meadow, and loosed girdles from about their waists. They shook the girdles in air; and the girdles grew and spread and took weird shapes, and Helder with a start knew them for the strangling Witch mantles he had seen at work in Goldemar's gardens in Fairie Town.

Then each one snapped a little salve box open—Helder had seen such boxes as those before—and the maid of the Witch Mark spoke to him.

"There stand the hemp fields of the Valleylands. We go to get the stalks of them, the longest and the straightest. Here is a knife for the cutting; and here a cord for binding; and this," she brushed his hands with the Witch salve which he knew and had used before, "this makes you unseen of the Valleymen, who will doubtless come and seek to take the spoil from you. See that you lose not one stalk when

once you have cut it. Take so much as you can carry, and no more. And, now, work as you can."

Each gathered her fluttering mantle into one arm, and they were away; but Helder heard a whisper, "She will most surely be caught; and the Witch Dame herself will have to come for her, which the Witch Dame will most surely loathe"; and there was a breath of laughter as they scattered and ducked into the hemp.

It happened as he had been told. There were Valleymen watchers in that field, and they saw the waving hempstalks. They knew what that waving meant, and came with rake and scythe and pitchfork to stop the unseen thieves.

Helder, cutting, binding, dodging, watched the Witch Maids from the corner of his eye—the easy evading of the Valleymen, the quick passing of the bundles from one to another; and twice there was a bubble of laughter, and once one cast her mantle, smothering the peasant whose pitchfork threatened her spoil. Then, the Valleymen closed about him; and next when he had the time to look, the Witch Maids were gone. Two fields away he spied them, balancing their unwieldy bundles on their heads and making off back by the way they had come to the hills.

Helder did not try to join them. He even hid when he saw one turn to look around; and it was not until the long running was over and the wall of rock again in sight that he stepped up behind them, jostling his

stalks against theirs. They were all crowding in upon one another and did not notice him. But what happened? They did not enter by the wonted place; a new door opened to them far down the wall, and they pushed through, Helder last and unnoticed as before. A new opening and new windings; now and again, widenings and a glimpse of passages leading off to either hand. Helder's nightly wanderings had never brought him here. Another turn, and they trooped into a new gallery where many fires burned and many niches held broad slabs where one could work.

Helder stared about him, aghast. What was being done here? On all sides there lay about the floor—what was it?—here the head of a sheep; there the tail and hoofs of a cow; in this corner a whole calf stood propped against the wall; and yonder, pushed aside and partly covered by half the body of a goat—Helder grew cold in looking—a child, a little girl, straight and stiff on the grimy floor.

As in a dream, he saw the Witch Dame moving between the fires; he saw a Witch Maid crouching on the floor—as surely as Goldemar was King in Fairie Town, she was fitting the parts of the beasts together! —and now Mardah, waving a long brush, rushed out from a niche scolding, "Look what you do, stupid! Had you no eyes in your head? The fifth calf has three white feet and no star on its forehead!"

He heard the Dame ask where the new Thekla was

and what portion of the hempstalks she had brought; and the Witch Maids cast their burdens on the floor and answered, there were men and beatings in the Valleylands, and when they escaped with their spoil, the new Thekla was not with them. Then Helder stumbled forward and cast his bundle atop the others; and the Witch Dame chuckled; and the Witch Maids stared and gasped and stared again.

But there was no time for talk: he was hurled into the night's work. It was, "Bring this!" "Take that!" "Crush these stalks into the pot!" "Carry the heads yonder from my way!" and amidst the din —this work was not done in frightened silence as that of the Valleychildren—he saw growing before his eyes a herd of cattle, calves and cows and one great bull; and Mardah rushed about, brandishing her brush and painting the great, stiff forms; and above all rose the voice of the Witch Dame calling for more hempstalks for her caldron.

What happened next Helder could not clearly tell. A lull in the work, and the Witch Maids pressed back around the walls. Then, clouds of steam arose from the centre caldron; a sickening scent filled the air; and the Witch Dame, her mantle flapping behind her, sped to and fro like some great, evil bird. The lifeless cattle took on sudden life and filled the place with bellowings; a great door flew open, and they rushed through into the open with the throng of Witch Maids after them; and the Witch Dame stood in the doorway

shouting orders as maids and cattle swept around the montainside and out of her sight.

There was another rush to the Valleylands. This time the chase went farther to the north. The Witch Maids circled around the new-made herd, rushing it down the slopes ; they stood at the head of tiny gorges, waving it on through the night ; and when it broke into bewildered lowings, they broke into delighted laughter and shouted that the Witch Dame's hand had not lost its cunning for all she was afraid to stir from the shelter of her cave: and one of them asked Helder how he had fared in the hemp fields. And then Mardah called an order, and half of them were gone, and Helder stood with the rest circling the cattle round, staring into the dark and wondering what he would do if the red Elf lanterns of the Kobold Crowd should now come bobbing down the slope. Then his company moved on again with the herd, on into a fenced lane, and, letting down the bars at the end, they turned the quieted beasts into a meadow and came away.

Helder was always looking about ; and soon he saw on a bluff to the right another herd of cattle outlined against the sky—cows and calves and one great bull—and coming closer—by all the Folk of Fairie Town ! it was the same herd which they had but come from driving into the meadow and the other Witch Maids were standing guard over it !

The two companies joined and took this herd away with them ; but now there were no shouts and no wild

frolicking. They moved sedately; they spoke in whispers, and kept sharp lookout from side to side. They came to the end of the Valleylands, and entered the land of rolling hills. Here they halted, and in the beginnings of the dawn cloaked men came to meet them and took the cattle and drove the cattle straight into the nearest hillside.

And the Witch Maids sat upon the ground and fanned their hot faces.

V

THE WITCH MAIDS.

"SHE was quick in the Valleylands, you say?"

"Yes," Mardah admitted reluctantly, "she was quick."

"That is also the word of the others," nodded the Witch Dame. "She was quick with the work here, too. The power of the potion is wonderful. Would I had its secret," she added gloomily. "Before I did not dare trust; but now, surely time enough has gone by to see that what was said of the spell is true. She learns quickly, this new Thekla; and you all of you say she does not lag when it comes to a race?"

"That is true," Mardah answered sourly; whereupon the Witch Dame grew angry.

"What is this you think?" she snapped. "You would have all things made easy for you. You are jealous of the power of the potion. You grow too high in your mind. Where is the trouble to take and teach one who is quick? You would have all knowledge for yourself; you think there is none like yourself, and that I cannot do without you. With the

potion I can have others as good, and better than you to help me. You now hear my word: You take this Thekla. From this day she is your comrade; where you go, she goes; the things I order you do together. See you teach her all you know and without grudging. If you do not——"

But Mardah snapped her fingers and laughed when the Witch Dame was gone. Then she ran to find Helder.

"The change has come, Prince! Now, you shall see! Before I could not even look at you, for Witch Maids have no dealings with Valleychildren, and had the Dame seen us talking together, she had straightway thought something amiss. But, now, now the true sport begins for you!"

And it was as Mardah said; for the joy of life became so great as it had been when the fiddle and Rudroon and he had the sweep of the Valleylands for a playground.

He was given the garb of the Witch Maids to wear, and a magic salve box to carry, and a mantle; and one of the first things he learnt was to cast his mantle and not to tangle himself in its folds. He learnt many things —the songs, the Albleyk melodies of the Witch Folk, their calls and rappings; the trick of opening rock-doors, which the Valleychildren were never to know; the names, many of them, of the potions and salves that lined the cave walls, and what was their use; how to make Witch wands of the hazel boughs that grew

in King Goldemar's Copses—only the Witch Maids never went to gather them in these days; of what use sassafras was to the Valley people, and fernseed and the poppy plant.

And, above all, he learnt the great art of making ghost people and ghost cattle from the hempstalks that grew in the Valleylands: but what it was put life into them Mardah could not tell him; for the Witch Dame did not make that potion, or keep it where anyone could see, and none of the Witch Maids knew the look of it even. But this much Mardah knew: that the Valleymen could not tell the ghost people and ghost cattle from their own; that cattle and people always died a sudden death, and the Valleymen never knew that the true ones had been taken away by the Witch Folk. He learnt other things besides, which not even the Witch Maids knew; for the Witch Dame had a way of muttering to herself when the two of them were alone together, as often happened when ghost people were being made, muttering and marking on the wall—she did not take the potion-livened Valleygirl into account, for all the girl's wits had been sharpened; and so it happened that Helder came to know the meaning of the signs that sprawled like spiders' webs on the cave walls; that and other things.

It was a glorious time; and now he went on swift errands into the hills, and now he was hooping away to the plains with the Witch Maids to sell Witch

wares to the Valley people. That was the greatest fun of all.

They scattered when they reached the plains, dividing the little towns and villages among them. With the dusk, or the first twinkle of stars they entered the quiet streets. There was a song to sing by this window, a piping bird-note to trill at the end of yonder wall, a single high-voiced call at the street corner, that the buyers might know that the Witch Maids were down from the hills again.

"Sassafras; fernseed; and hazelwand. Potions to make the ugly fair. Love potions!"—for lumbering peasant lads. How Helder laughed to himself as he dealt them out! It was a secret business; but now and then he would plant himself in the market-place, and boldly sound his call, and giggle as redfaced bauer and burgher father came tumbling from his home and the Witch patrol hurried out with bunglesome lantern and pike to catch the offender.

"There is one thing which I do not understand," Helder said late one night as he and Mardah turned their back on the last village — they were usually first to have finished and could often have an hour to themselves as they went swinging home from the Valleylands—"why should the Witch Dame be forever in need of these copper pieces which the peasants give us, when gold lies knee-deep up there in the Witch Cave?"

"How do you come to know so much about gold that lies in the cave?"

"I have known it—oh, long ago, when I pounded herbs with the Valleychildren——"

"Your prowls might have been the end of you," scolded Mardah. "If she had found that the Sleep Spell did not spell you, then——"

"Who was that who was with her that night?" Helder asked for the fiftieth time, and as usual Mardah answered, "There are many Witch Dames and Witch Caves more than one. The Dames often visit among themselves. And as for the gold,—that is Witch gold, and it is useless unless melted with coin which has passed from hand to hand among the Valleymen: for that reason she has need of the coins we bring."

Helder jingled the coins.

"My Plume! it is a wondrous life to lead," he said. "Wonder is to me the Valleychildren do not grow to love it, so that they would wish for no other."

"'The Valleychildren!'"

Mardah sniffed.

"How do you know you are not yourself a Valleygirl, Mardah?" laughed Hedler.

"I am most surely a Witch Maid," she said solemnly. "I have been here ever since I can remember. I have never had another life."

"For all that you might still be a Valleygirl——"

But Mardah grew cross at the idea of her ever having come from such stupid people.

"Besides," she added, "there is not one of the Valleychildren—those who are in the cave and those on

the hills—that does not hate the life and would not get away if could be."

"Why can they not go back to their homes?" Helder asked. "At least, those who search herbs on the hills might go: the others cannot leave the cave."

Mardah looked puzzled.

"That is a thing which I myself do not altogether understand," she admitted. "But the Witch Dame has caught part of them—that I know—and hid it away; and that and the spells she uses gives her power over them. Until they get back the part she has hidden, they cannot go. Even if they did, they would have to come back to her again."

Helder thought over this.

"But how can that be?" he burst forth suddenly. "Knowt's sister, Thekla, has gone away to the Valley-lands; and she has never come back to the Witch Dame."

"Yes," Mardah agreed; "but Knowt's sister Thekla never *worked* for the Witch Dame. Beating or no beating, cross word or kind, she never so much as raised an herb from the pile where it lay, or carried a kettle to the fire. For that reason, though part of her may still be hidden away in the cave, the Dame has no power over her to draw her back to finish work she never began."

Helder pondered again.

"It seems great foolishness," he announced at last.

"Nevertheless it is great sport, this life, and most of all the going to the Valleys to sell Witch wares."

But Helder went once too often to the Valleylands, and when he turned back to the Witch Cave it seemed to him he should never be glad again. It was mid-afternoon when he reached the cave; he had sold his wares to woodcutters on the way and returned earlier than ever before. None of the Witch Maids were near the entrance, and he walked on down the galleries with a lump in his throat and his hands clenched. Suddenly he started back. He had come without meaning to to the Sleep Gallery of the Valleychildren; and there before him on the floor lay a little girl, white and still, with closed eyes. At first, he thought she must be a little ghost girl, not yet given life; but, no! those who had helped to fashion them could tell the difference: this was most surely a Valleychild.

While he bent to look, the cunning step of the Witch Dame sounded close at hand, and Helder darted into a niche, pressed himself close in a corner, and waited. He had never before seen such a jar as the one she carried. Jar? Rather a ball — of glass; or else a water bubble, kissed to a hundred colors by the light. It looked as though the touch of a flower would break it.

The Witch Dame knelt; she held the ball close over the child's lips; she laid a hand over the child's heart; she muttered — Helder heard the words and his teeth clenched and his face grew white. The child moaned

and tried to turn away ; but the cruel hand pressed harder ; a half sob, half moan rose from the pale little lips and— The Witch Dame chuckled as the strange, pale light flashed into the ball. She clapped her hand over the bottom, and hurried away.

Down one gallery and another and another ; but Helder was close behind. Not for nothing had he lived among the Witch Folk : his step was light as theirs and his wit keener. At last the Dame halted, bent and made quick marking on the ground, then hurried on. Helder came to the mark : it was the Sign of Forbidding. No one was allowed to pass, no one in all the cave *could* pass beyond it. Helder had seen such signs before : they held no power for him. He overleapt the mark and passed on.

A place of many tiny passages, twisting, turning, running into one another ; each side of each passage lined row on row, so high as the arm could reach, and higher, with the same round, clear balls. Every ball held a light within, and below every one was written, in the strange Witch characters which he had learned to read, a name.

Helder, panting, grasped a rocky ledge. There could be no doubt: he had seen the Witch Dame stealing that part of the Valleychildren of which Mardah had spoken to him ; and this was the place where she kept all those parts hidden. He tiptoed on, fearful lest he should not find her in time, fearful lest she should see him before he could hide. He found her,

and crouched, waiting. She had no thought of being watched. She had closed the bottom of her gleaming ball, and he had not seen her do it — the more pity. Now, she held it up ; now she breathed upon it ; now she placed it high on a row with many others and moved away.

Helder waited. She had gone : there was no sound in all the place. He tiptoed up and looked. A word was already written beneath the new-placed ball— "Trina" ; and under that, so that one scarce could read, " from Niebuhr, house of Hammel."

That was enough. He reached, steadied himself, and grasped the ball ; he laid it gently on the floor— the light within wavered and paled. Quickly, carefully he rubbed out the words that stood beneath its place, took the ball up again in both his hands, and left the gallery.

That happened in mid-afternoon. The stars were out and midnight near before Helder saw any of the Witch Folk again.

As he came to the rock-door for the second time since dawn, Mardah slipped out from the shelter of a boulder and ran to meet him.

" Prince," she whispered, " you must not go back there. Never again. It is not safe ! Something has happened among the Valleychildren : since time for the Sleep Spell to be spoken over them the Witch Dame rages. She swears some one has meddled with

forbidden things. She says some enemy is with us. She swears every one of the Witch Cave people will be searched, Valleychildren and Witch Maids alike, and she has begun already. You cannot go in, Prince! It is bad enough that you have been gone so long; but if she searches you——"

"She finds the Ruby Clasp and learns that I am Prince Royal in Fairie Town," Helder broke in with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Yes," whispered Mardah, "and the True Token is of all things that for which she wishes most."

"'The True Token,'" echoed Helder. "'The True Token'! *I* have not the True Token."

"There!" Mardah interrupted impatiently. "There! Your Ruby Clasp. That is the True Token—or part of it."

"But Mardah——"

"It is as I say. The Wise Woman of Earth gave the Thorn Princess the Great Ruby Clasp in a magic box—the True Token. Whenever a son comes to the house, another clasp is added to it; whenever a son dies, a clasp disappears. It alone remains. And each clasp is part of the True Token, has power to open the most secret doorways, to break Witch spells that nothing else could break, to make him strong to whom it belongs and kill the one who would wear it unrightfully."

"But Mardah——"

"Nevertheless it is a great treasure for anyone,"

Mardah hurried on. "There is nothing the Witch Dame would rather have. She may not wear it, but she can use it — even as the Elf-chief used King Goldemar's True Token when he opened the gate of the Thorn Palace. You must not go in, Prince: she will search you and find it; and then you will never know happiness again, for you will never again see the light of the day."

Helder looked down gravely into the frightened face.

"All this that you tell me is most interesting," he said, "and I thank you for the telling. I shall use the knowledge. Nevertheless I go into the Witch Cave — because I wish to and for other reasons. It is nothing that one should grieve over — yet," he added kindly. "There is no harm done—yet. Come. Let us go in. I have that which may turn the mind of the Dame to other things."

The Witch Dame was raging indeed. Even the Witch Maids were white; and the Valleychildren, who had not been allowed to sleep, cowered and swayed where they stood.

Helder marched straight up to her; he bent to her hand, and pressed something between her fingers; and when she had once seen, choked back the gasp that rose to her lips, and staggered to her stool, he stood by and whispered in her ear, "The word was that the guest comes to-night, one hour past the middle. You are to be ready."

VI

THE WITCH DAME'S GUEST.

THE Witch Dame and her guest were huddled over the fire. The guest was angry: he tapped his foot, and shifted his cloak, and snarled.

"What is this babbling of a Valleygirl, and what has she to do with the potion?"

"How many times must I tell you? That I gave her to drink of the potion——"

"The more fool you, for wasting it."

"How was I to know that there was truth in what was said of it?"

"It is your business to know whether there is truth, or not. I can make no sense to your mumblings: show me the potion."

The Dame handed him the phial. He held it to the light, and scolded that part of it had already been used. Then he loosed the stopper.

"As well now as any time," he said; but with shrill outcry she snatched it from him.

"That is madness! That cannot be done!"

"And why not?" fumed the man. "I can make

no meaning to your babblings. Begin again. After many days you came to the place where lives the Wise Woman of Earth and you told her that you wanted—*what* did you tell her?"

The Witch Dame shifted uneasily.

"What is it to you what I said? There is what you want."

"What did you say?"

She set her lips and did not answer.

He leaned forward; the cloak fell from about him, and his hat dropped to the ground.

"*Babeera!*" he hissed. "*What did you say?*"

She cowered, and held up a withered hand, and whimpered for him not to speak her name, that she would tell him all.

Had they been listening, they could have heard a stirring behind them in the darkness when the man's hat fell and the firelight lit up his face. But they were not listening. Why should they be when the Sleep Spell had been spoken for all?

"When I came to the Wise Woman of Earth," the Witch Dame said, "I laid down my gold made true with Valley coin, and I promised also skilled maids to help with her work, and I said, 'You know us. There is trouble in our midst, and we are not great enough to master it. I beg you, give me a potion to make our wits sharper than those of any Witch, or Elf, that we may end our trouble.'"

"What was her answer?"

The Witch Dame hesitated, and the man repeated his question.

"She said, 'Is it for Valleyman, for Witch, or Elf?' 'All three,' said I."

"Fool!" muttered the man.

"'I have no help that is help to Valleyman, to Witch, and Elf alike,' said the Wise Woman. 'I have no help for an evil which I do not know.' She pointed for me to take up the gold, and she turned away. Then I knew I could not get what I wanted without I told——"

"What did you tell?" was the threatening question.

"I said we had lost a treasure; it had been stolen, and we could not get it back again; that the potion was for one who was working more than all others to get the treasure back for us. Then she gave me this."

The man again took the phial from her and held it to the light.

"Did you tell her my name?"

"She asked me, and would not give it without the name, and I said it was for one sometimes called the Strange Player."

The man sprang to his feet.

"Fool!" he thundered. "Fool! I have played by her door: her people have followed me, though that she may not know. But do you think I take anything she gives when she knows it is for *me?*"

"And do you think I did not think of that?" was the triumphant retort. "Why did I give the potion

to a useless Valleygirl, but that in case danger, or death lurked in it no one would be hurt?"

For a long time the Strange Player stood staring at the phial; then he sat down.

"So that was the point of your telling me of the prowess of that Valleymaid of yours," he muttered. "But you said after she had taken it she forgot the past."

"That is doubtless because she is a Valleygirl: with you it would not be so."

"You said it changed her eyes from blue to black——"

"Can you not see," grumbled the Witch Dame, "that these things happen because she is a *Valleymaia* and the drink is not for mortals?"

"Wonder is it did not kill her," mused the Strange Player. Then he handed the phial back to the Witch Dame. "Measure out the portion you gave her and give it me," he ordered; but the Dame shook her head.

"Not here: it must be given in the open — not less than half a day's travelling from the cave. That was the word of the Wise Woman."

"Then come with me to the open and give it me."

"I cannot. In truth, I cannot, now. There has some mischief been done among the Valleychildren, and until I know what it is and how it came to be, I cannot leave."

"Then give me the phial, and I will go alone."

The hag shook her head.

"It must be given by me: that was the word of the Wise Woman."

"And did you, then, give it to your Valleygirl?"

"No; because I feared it might have death for both the one who took and the one who gave. But it has not," she sighed thankfully; but the Strange Player was angry.

"I wait no more: I wait for nothing! There is time to play with your children later. You bring your potion and you come to the open and give it to me now—*Babeera!*" and again she cowered at the sound of her name and rose to do as he bid.

"Let me at least first take the Sleep Spell from the Witch Maids, that they may wake with the dawn," she begged. "It is not often I use it for them, yet sometimes——"

However, before she slipped away into the galleries, she came and stood before him.

"You have asked me many questions and I have answered you," she said bitterly. "I have worked and you have blamed; yet the work I do — much of it —is for you, and much of the work of my Folk is for you. Am I to have no word of them? Do you bring me no word of the company who worked for you in Fairie Town? Some few of them were yours, but most of them were mine. None of them have come back to me. I have not dared send others to search for them. I could not go myself——"

"They are dead, all of them," the Strange Player

said shortly. "Those that were not killed by the Fairie Belts in the first rush were killed afterwards. Their bodies were burnt outside of Fairie Town and their ashes given to the winds and a thousand streams."

The Witch Dame lifted the Sleep Wand and pursed her lips.

"It was as well I sent others instead of going myself," she smiled, "though I should likely have come away alive. So Mardah is the only one who knows of that sally: she alone escaped. Perhaps it is as well. And there is no news——"

"No news," said the Strange Player impatiently, "but that the Witch Boxes of our dead have been put to good purpose. There is not an Elf in Fairie Town but now has the power to see us. For the rest, the Princes have been sent away—where, I cannot learn—and it is said the fiddle has been taken from Fairie Town. Come, now! Be quick that we may be off and learn whether the potion will give me the wits I need to find and steal it back again."

With the first streak of dawn the Witch Maids wakened and were loud in their anger that the Dame should have struck them with the Sleep Spell. Helder, standing by, half-hidden, heard their outcry; but he was listening for other sounds more than their angry words, and he had not long to wait. A buzzing off somewhere at the other end of the cave. It grew and grew and became the hum of many voices; and, as the

Witch Maids, still half-dazed by the Sleep Spell, hurried to the Central Cave, they were met by the rush of the Valleychildren.

The Valleychildren? But how changed! Where were their white, scared faces, their shivering forms? Laughter was on their lips and brightness in their eyes. They held one another by the hand; they clasped one another about the neck; they shouted for joy as they raced from their Sleep Gallery, across the Central Cave, across the entrance out into the rock path, and away. One of the Witch Maids, trying to stop the rush, was overturned for her pains. Another, following, came back with the word that the Sign of Forbidding was marked in the path out yonder, but that the rock-door beyond was open, and the Valleychildren had overleapt the Sign, poured through the door, and were gone.

The rest hurried out to see for themselves; but Helder slipped up behind Mardah, touched her arm, and beckoned her to come away with him.

"Prince," stammered Mardah before they were fairly out of hearing of the others, "what has come over the Valleychildren? And where is the Witch Dame?"

"The Witch Dame has gone."

"Gone!" echoed Mardah. "She said she would not so much as step from the cave until she had found the new little Valleygirl and the one who took the little girl from the Sleep Gallery and hid her elsewhere in the cave."

"She will not find the child here," Helder said indifferently. "That child is in her mother's arms in the Valleylands."

Mardah gasped.

"How—what—Prince! Is this doing of yours?"

"Yes."

"Then *that* is what kept you so long last night," she muttered. "And these others? What has come over them? Where have they gone?"

"To the Valleylands."

"But, Prince——"

"I helped them," said Helder simply.

Mardah stared at him.

"I know not how you could have done this thing, nor why you have done it," she said breathlessly at last; "but it will do no good. They will all have to come back again. She has caught part of them, the Witch Dame has, and has power over them. They will have to come back."

"That power has gone. She has that power over them no more."

Mardah put her hands to her head, as one who cannot think. "The Witch Dame has gone away." She spoke in quick whispers. "But any minute the Witch Dame may come back. Prince——"

"She will not soon be back," Helder said quietly. "She has gone away to try the strength of the potion with the Strange Player——"

With a cry Mardah seized hold of him.

"The Strange Player! Prince, have you seen the Strange Player?"

"Yes," said Helder. "I have seen the Strange Player, and I have heard the Strange Player, and what is more I know the way by which the Strange Player came to the Witch Cave. Mardah," he went on after a moment—her hands had dropped from his arm; she was leaning against the wall—"Mardah, there have been many things about the Witch life here which you would not tell me. When I asked who the cloaked men were who take the cattle from us and drive them into the hill, and sometimes come to us with messages, you never would tell me. When I asked what manner of place is in the hillside where they go, you would not say. You would never tell why it was the Witch Dame wanted the fiddle when it was not hers, and when I asked what was the place you sang of—the door and the steps leading down and a thousand passages—you said they were but words strung together in idleness."

Mardah's eyes had long since fallen to the ground.

"Where would have been the harm of telling me the thing as it was?" Helder asked. "That the men were servants of the Strange Player, that the Strange Player knows the name of the Witch Dame and so has power over her"—Mardah darted a quick glance at him. "Where would have been the harm of telling me that behind us in the mountainside lies the country of the Strange Player?"

"You would have wanted to go there," Mardah said faintly.

"Then the country of the Strange Player *does* lie there," laughed Helder, and he struck his knee in his delight, "and the door that opens at the back of the Central Cave leads to it!"

"You cannot go in there, Prince," Mardah cried wildly, again seizing hold of him. "It is not safe. You will never come out alive! You cannot go."

Helder straightened himself, and took her hands from his arm, and looked into her face.

"Oh, what has come over us! What has come over us!" wailed the girl. "What is the madness has come over everything since yesterday!"

Helder clenched one hand. "Listen, Mardah," he said quickly. "Even if the Strange Player had not come to the cave last night, I would stay here no longer; nor would I have let the Valleychildren stay could I have helped it. Their mothers moan for them down in the Valleylands. I heard one yesterday, as I sold my wares to the woodcutters, and her cries still ring in my ears. Mardah, it was the same woman who came to the cave the first night you brought me here. She told her name and the child's name, called on the Witch Folk to give back her last little girl, and acted like one gone mad. So, when on coming back to the cave I saw the Witch Dame with a little Valley-girl, stealing that part of the child of which you speak and hiding it away, I took the ball that held the flame

and broke it with my Ruby Clasp, and I took the child back to where I had left the woman fainting among the woodcutters, and I put the child in the woman's arms."

Helder laughed a little.

"She told me of her other stolen child, and asked if that, too, could not be brought back to her again. Listen, Mardah. On my way back to the cave again, after that, one of the cloaked men stepped out to me with the message that the Witch Dame was to have a guest that night and a token to give to her; and when later we were all struck with the Sleep Spell, I watched, since it does not hold me, and saw the little door at the back of the cave open — not knowing it was there I stood so close I thought at the time I had surely been seen, as he came through; but he was thinking of other things and did not look around. Then, when the two were gone—I had to slip back and play at sleeping with the rest of you, for the Dame came to loose the Spell, that you might wake with the dawn; and again I was all but caught—then, I went to the place where the Dame has hidden her glass balls that hold the flames of the Valleychildren, and," Helder bit off his words one by one, "I broke every ball with my Ruby Clasp, and I took Witch Wands that show the way to the Valleylands and put them between the drowsy fingers of the children, and whispered in the ears of many what they must do when they waked, and I opened the rock-door for them. You saw for

yourself: when they wakened, they were free, for not even the Sign of Forbidding had power over them, and they have gone away."

Helder looked at Mardah, but Mardah would not raise her eyes.

"And now, Mardah," he said quietly, "I, too, go away."

She did not speak.

"Come with me to the gallery where the Ghost People are made," he said gently. "There is something I would give you."

But Mardah put his hand back.

"One moment, Prince; I will meet you there"; and she was gone.

"Prince Helder," she said later when she joined him in the great empty gallery. She stood before him with her hands crossed and something held between them. "Prince Helder," she repeated solemnly, "you go to a country that you do not know and to dangers that you cannot dream of." She caught her breath. "You gave help to the Valleychildren when you sent them away: wands to guide them. Will you not at least take a wand to guide you in the Strange Country? It will show the safest paths and the surest of that land," and she held it out to him.

Helder looked at it.

"Why has it golden knobs instead of leaden ones?" he asked.

"Because it is for a land where there is no sun.

Will you not take it—Prince?" she turned her head away and again held it out to him, but he saw that there were tears in her eyes and her lips trembled.

"Yes, Mardah," he said hastily, "I will take it. And now, listen; no, do not turn your head away. Look at me——"

But when Mardah looked she screamed and could find no words and stretched out trembling fingers to touch the thing he held in one arm; and Helder laughed delightedly and hugged the thing and then held it out to her.

"Is it not well done?" he laughed. "Has my hand not skill? You did not know but that it was the true one. I made it bit by bit, as I could, when there was no one to see. It may stand me in good stead one of these days—my ghost fiddle."

Mardah touched the fiddle in bewilderment.

"But, Prince," she objected faintly, "it will never have life——"

Helder pulled her to the wall.

"That is what I would show you," he said hastily. "One day while we worked together, the Dame and I, she forgot to take it from its hiding-place before I came; and then she could not leave the caldron, or the brew would have spoilt, and she bade me bring it her —see, Mardah, behind this jar, and this other one, and now you put your hand back, further back, Mardah: the place is almost large enough to crawl into when once it is found. Now! Do you see the bottles? rows

on rows of them there are in here, and the stuff within them is white and thick, and the scent enough to kill instead of quickening. And no Sign of Forbidding is marked nearby."

Helder put the bottle back again.

" If ever you want to use it, now you know where it is. After I had taken it to the Dame that day, she bade me straightway forget the place and the phial; and when the next day she asked about it and I knew nothing, she thought all was well. Here is my part of it."

He took a phial with the white mixture from his pocket, showed it her and put it back again. Then he took out another phial.

" That is the part of the potion of the Wise Woman of Earth which the new Thekla drank," he laughed. " That also I take with me." He put it back. "And now, Mardah," he lay down the ghost fiddle and the wand she had given him, and seized her two hands, " if ever you are in danger from the Witch Dame, remember this, that her name is ' Babeera' —"*Babeera*,' Mardah! Knowing that, you have power over her, since when one speaks a Witch Dame's name she cannot but do your bidding. And now——"

The garb of the Witch Maids fell from him; and he again stood clad as the Valleylad who had gone a-wandering with the Piper of Hamel. He picked up fiddle and wand with one hand; he snapped off his Kobold belt with the other. Then he leaped away.

He reached the Central Cave and looked around. Far at the other end the Witch Maids were clustered about the entrance, looking down the rock path and talking excitedly. Back along the passageway from which he had come Mardah was listlessly walking towards him. He waved his hand to her; then, looking and feeling along the wall, suddenly struck it with his Ruby Clasp. Not the faintest sound answered the blow; but silently a door swung back to him. He stepped through; and the door closed on the Witch's Cave.

VII

"THE STEPS THAT LEAD DOWN."

"HERE," said Helder, "comes the opening."

He had gone down unnumbered steps; down, down, until he thought the heart of the earth was surely come. Then, when at last the bottom was reached and three dusk-filled passages opened before him, he had turned to the right—as the wand pointed—and hurried forward. There had been long hours of wandering—maybe; he saw paths turning off to the left, always to the left, but the wand pointed straight ahead, and he had followed on, endless hours of walking where no sound broke the stillness and there was nothing to be seen. Now he had come to the end: here the Strange Country must open for him. He raised his belt; he struck the wall; there was a rumble and the rock slid back. A burst of light rushed to meet him; and, covering his eyes with his hands to hide the dazzle, he stumbled forward, tripped, caught himself, tripped again, and fell.

He was lifted up. Voices grew loud around him; great men pressed about him; great fires leaped about

him ; the roar of bellows filled the air and the sound of the hammer of the forge ; and before Helder had recovered his wits enough to know what place this was that he seemed to know as having seen before, one of the smiths fell at his feet and clasped his knees and called out that it was Prince Helder of Fairie Town who stood in their midst and that now all was well.

For a long time Helder said no word ; but his lips grew white and whiter, and within himself he was storming, " Mardah has done this thing ! *She knew !* She did not want me in the Stranger's Country. She gave me a wand to guide me here to a Bergschmied's smithy. Mardah has done this. I will never forgive her ! Never ! "

He threw the wand into the nearest fire. He felt the fiddle under his cloak ; he felt the phials in his pocket : all were safe. Then he looked down at Karl who still knelt at his feet; Karl, the great fellow whom he had learnt to love at the Nickolaner Hof.

" Prince," Karl said timidly, " there is much sorrow because of you in Fairie Town. Let us take you back there : there is no time to lose. Let us start now."

Helder felt the ghost fiddle pressed to his side, and little by little his face brighteneed.

" Yes, Karl," he said at last, " we will go back to Fairie Town ; " and the brawny company of Mountain Smiths roared and swung their hammers, and said they would go too, all of them.

" Karl," asked Helder, turning to look at the black

mouth of the smithy before the last knoll hid it from sight, "by how many doors can one enter your place there?"

"By but one, my Prince," said Karl; "the one you see."

"There is no other way?"

"None, my Prince."

Helder laughed and hugged his ghost fiddle under his cloak, and his heart sang.

"They do not know! They do not know! I shall have my fiddle, my true fiddle, back again, and I shall come back to the smithy of the Mountain Smiths, and from there I shall go into the country of the Strange Player. And all will be well."

SCHLOSS HOHENBURG

I

THE NEW HEIR.

BARON HUGO sat in the banquet hall of Hohenburg, and looked down the empty board. The fighting men had had their evening meal and gone away; and the old man was left alone with his drinking-horn, the fire on his big hearth, and his thoughts.

He looked at the sleeve where his arm should have been, at the leg that would no longer bend; he looked at the mighty rafters overhead, the barred windows and massive door. Beyond that door there were passageways, stairs, and chambers; towers, half a dozen; inner balconies to overlook the courtyard; and there was the wall with gate and drawbridge, and the wide moat to encircle all.

Well might a man be proud to be the lord of such a safe old castle, perched on the peak of the hills. Well might the Herr sit in his mammoth hall, listen to the

laughter and the clatter of feet along the passages, and be filled with pride. But the longer the Baron listened, the sterner grew his face; and he thought that, just as the lord of Hohenburg was maimed and had been brought home all but dead from the wars, just so the house of Hohenburg was shattered and was all but dead: the halls of the masters lay dark and silent; the laughter came from the rooms of the servingmen.

Three sons; tall and straight and strong, such as a king might boast of! Three sons! All three dead in the wars.

The Herr of Hohenburg looked at his shattered limbs and sighed; he looked at the barred windows and scowled. It was too dark to see; but outside there in the night, across two valleys and a line of hills there rose from the wooded heights of a further range the defiant towers of Count Eber. Baron Hugo scowled again as he raised his drinkinghorn.

"I must get me the heir for Schloss Hohenburg," he said.

Then the whispering in the great room began.

Fritz was but newly come to the castle. Until three weeks ago he had lived below in one of the villages that Hohenburg claimed in vassalage; and the wonder of the great place where he had been bidden to serve left him no rest. He was eaten up with curiosity now, as he came tumbling down the steps into the lowceiled room where the men were drinking and casting dice;

and he made straight for the fireplace where lounged the old war-dogs, snarling because there was no one to lead them to the fight.

"Elbrecht," he said, "what is it is happening to the Herr in the hall above?"

Elbrecht, the Baron's trusted henchman, looked up fiercely.

"He is stamping about in a pretty anger," Fritz went on. "The place rumbles to the sound of his voice, and he shouts, 'Who are you to be telling me what is best for the house of Hohenburg? This matter is mine to do, and by me it will be settled——'"

A mighty voice broke in upon Fritz's tale, and the walls echoed to the name of Elbrecht, called many times and in anger. Elbrecht jumped from his seat; his fist sent Fritz sprawling across the floor.

"You are not here to ask questions and pry upon the Herr Baron," he growled. Then he went out.

"Make you ready, you and your comrade, and twenty others," thundered Baron Hugo before his henchman was fairly inside the door. "You ride with the dawn from Hohenburg, south over the ridges to the valley of the Staar. Down the banks of the Staar through a rolling country to the town of Alstadt. That town you enter, and there you give a letter which you will have to one Matilda von Wildsteg. You know the house; you know her?"

"The widow of Rupert of Wildsteg," Elbrecht said

stolidly, "the only child of Baron Henry; and Baron Henry was your one brother."

"Right," nodded Baron Hugo, still breathing heavily. "She has a son who comes back here with you. Tell her, if she is none too eager to let the young Herr go, that he belongs to the house of Hohenburg: he is the last. When I am gone, he is Baron in my place."

Elbrecht and his men went away, and it was weeks before they were heard of again; but one day Hans, Elbrecht's comrade, came riding into the Burghof with word that the escort of Yunker Rupert would reach Hohenburg before nightfall.

Then there was great excitement; for the Baron ordered a royal welcome for his grandnephew. A cavalcade went dashing away over the bridge to meet the party from Alstadt and left behind them a bevy of people busy with much furbishing of arms.

Before evening the sound of Elbrecht's horn told the approach of the company: the drawbridge was again let down; the retainers lined up on either side of the gate; the women of the courtyard houses trooped out to make their knix; and the company clattered into the burg. The people looked, bowed, and scattered, the men cursing under their fierce mustaches. Was that the future Baron of Hohenburg, the lord of them all—that? They pitied the old Baron and the house, and they pitied themselves; and, though they none of them said so, they hated on first seeing him that slab

of clothes, the puny lad who had dropped from the big charger and stumbled up the steps into the burg.

The days went by, and the old Baron said never a word; but the people whispered that his heart was like to break with disappointment. However, they comforted themselves with the thought that all might yet grow well—in time: one could not expect much from lads reared in towns. But as time went on, all did not grow well; if anything, all grew worse. Little, thin, weak; with white, flabby cheeks, a drooping mouth and washed-out eyes where the tears were ever ready to gather — that was the Yunker of Wildsteg, the heir of the castle.

Never had there been such a lad in Hohenburg. He was afraid of the big horse he had ridden from Alstadt, afraid of the gloomy woods he had travelled through, afraid of the roaring torrents he had crossed and the sullen castle where he had come to live. He trembled at the shadowy corners, the dark rooms, and the black passages of the burg and the noises that went sighing through them.

When Elbrecht gave him his first fencing-lesson—that a Yunker should have come to his years and not know how a sword should be handled!— he burst into tears, dropped the good steel on the armory floor, and rushed away to hide himself in the scribe's room. When Elbrecht tried to tell him of the glory of Hohenburg and his duties to the name, he said that the life of the Hohenburg Barons was a murderous one, and

that he wished none of it: and when Elbrecht in desperation turned him over to old Ursula, it went no better.

Ursula was the nurse of the family, so old that she had taken care of the Yunker Rupert's grandfather when he was a child. She knew the history of the house and the duties of him who was to be its ruler better than any person alive; but when she drew Rupert into her room with the promise of gingernuts and began with her tales, he said that she spoke of devils and left her sitting by her fire and would have nothing more to do with her.

It was a sorry time, and the old Baron gnawed his mustache as he sat in his chair; and none dared speak to him.

To-night he seemed more than usually fierce. He pushed at his drinkinghorn and scowled down the long table. His nephew sat crouched before the fire of the great hall, reading by the shifting light of the flames. Every now and then he whimpered and drew back, and when asked, said that the cinders burnt him; and then his head again bobbed forward over the book. Suddenly he started up, dropping the costly pages among the ashes.

"What is it? Do you see anything?" the old man asked moodily.

Rupert shook his head; but he shivered beside the blazing hearth.

"Do you hear anything?"

"'WHAT IS IT? DO YOU SEE ANYTHING?'"

Again the lad shook his head.

"No," he whispered; "but what is it? Oh, this is a fearsome place!"

Baron Hugo sighed under his breath.

"It is nothing," he said. "Are you sure you heard no one speak?"

"I heard no one speak," stammered the boy.

His uncle leaned back in his chair, and his face looked drawn.

"It is nothing," he repeated fitfully. "It is perchance the wind in the chimney. Get back to your words."

But there was the smallest, the most mocking laugh up there at the head of the hall where the Baron's chair stood; and at the sound the old man's fingers clenched themselves around the stand of the drinking-horn. Again the laugh sounded close to his ear.

"Let be; will you?" he snarled under his breath; and he looked angrily at the palefaced boy, cowering over the fire.

"The heir whom the Baron Hugo has chosen for the Hohenburgers will be a great fighter when he is once grown," whispered a voice behind the Baron.

The voice was low and humble; but the Baron cursed in his throat.

"He will lead the Hohenburg henchmen to the wars, and bring much fame to the old house."

The Baron seized his drinkinghorn and drained it dry.

"He will not learn when Elbrecht teaches, but that is no matter: he is the heir whom the Herr Baron has chosen, and that makes all things well. Also, he will know how to rule in the castle. He will not listen to Ursula, but what matter? The future and the well-being of the house are in good hands: that the Herr Baron has chosen him for the heir is enough."

The old man rose, staggering, seized the drinking-horn, and, swearing mightily, cast it against the wall. There was a low laugh not two feet away from him, but not in the direction he had cast the horn.

"Baron Hugo must be well pleased with his choice. See how the heir of Hohenburg stands trembling by the fire!"

"Boy, get you gone; you and your cursed book!" thundered the old man; and Rupert, who had started, white and trembling, to his feet, fled from the hall. "And you," the Baron shook his one scarred fist at the empty air, "you keep your own counsel! I wish none of your thoughts about the house, or the heir of Hohenburg. What I have done, I have done."

"My Herr Baron," the voice pleaded, "let there at least——"

"None of your words!" roared the Baron. "I will do for myself! All will yet be well in Hohenburg, and that without you!" And, muttering and cursing, he stumped from the hall.

"All will yet be well in Hohenburg," echoed the voice. "But whether my Herr Baron does it alone is

another matter," it added, as the door groaned to after the angry lord.

"All will yet be well in Hohenburg."

The old man repeated the words as he limped down the passage. But whether there was truth in what he said seemed doubtful; for there followed a time such as had never before been known in the memory of the castle people, and so long as they lived they never forgot it.

That night there were moanings and groanings in every tower and chimney of the burg; there were gusts of wind hooting down the passageways, crashing the doors open, rattling the armour, and swelling and swaying and twisting the tapestries. There were whisperings and bursts of impish laughter that woke every sleeper and sent the chill down his back. In the stables the horses broke their halters, and rushed from stall to stall; and the stablemen who rose to quiet them had to call in others to help; and even then the beasts quivered and thrashed about, and kicked at one another and at the lanterns and the men who held them.

Daybreak came; but no ease. The moanings and groanings and gusts of wind continued; and more: for the fire would not light on any hearth; the buckets would not go down in the courtyard wells; the flour and bread had disappeared; the meat was spoilt. But worst of all, when the Baron was told of this last misfortune and ordered a hunting-party into the woods,

the drawbridge would not let down ; and the Hohenburgers discovered to their horror that they were prisoners in their own stronghold.

The women crowded into Nurse Ursula's room, and took a melancholy comfort in watching the old woman at her wheel, placidly spinning while the turmoil went on without. The men, pale in spite of themselves, sat in their quarters and waited. Yunker Rupert all but went mad from fear ; and the Baron in his chair on the chilly dais said never a word.

Three nights and three days the storm raged. At the end of the third day Baron Hugo ordered that the hall of state be opened, the costliest tapestries hung on the walls, the richest rugs spread on the floor, and the wax candles lit all about. The burg people drew great breaths of relief and went about the business of making ready.

When Elbrecht took word to the Baron that all was ready—Elbrecht's face was sour indeed !—the Baron commanded that all people keep below ; and when the place had become quiet, he hobbled down the stone stairway, and locked himself in the hall of state.

The men below pressed about their cold hearth. There was little speech among them and little moving ; and, at last, Fritz, who had tried to find out what the trouble was all about and had had beatings for his pains, could stand it no longer. He slipped away.

There was much rustling on the other side of the doors of the hall of state. Fritz bent to the keyhole.

He could see nothing; but he listened with all his ears, for Baron Hugo had begun to speak.

"This, then, is your wish,"—the Herr's voice was cold as icicles on a winter's night,—"that the heir of Hohenburg have a playfellow to make him less sour and sad? A lad of your own choosing, whom you will bring to my burg here and who shall dwell with the Yunker as a comrade, until it be seen whether the Yunker cannot be made more willing to learn what must be done to keep the name and the burg as should be? It is well. You have your wish. The boy may come: only this let me tell you — I have had dealings before with those who came as playfellows and counsellors to the young lords of Hohenburg—you know what I would say—and if any harm comes of this, or the hint of any harm, even, your boy whom you are so eager to lodge within these walls, your boy dies. And if you spirit him away so that his life be saved, then by the sword of the Barons! I will have revenge on you, if I tear down my every tower and wall to do it.—That is the end."

There was a stirring within, and Fritz slipped away just in time to save himself a meeting with his master; for the doors opened.

Elbrecht came clanking up from the men's quarters, saluted, and asked if the lights within should be put out.

"No," said the Baron. "Let them burn till morning; and, Elbrecht, tell the people to light their fires, eat, and go to sleep in peace. The burg spuks no more."

II

THE HEIR'S PLAYFELLOW.

"MY Cap and Plume!" ejaculated Helder. "This is most wonderful!"

He stood in the courtyard of Hohenburg, and gaped at the piles of stone rising about him.

"I have yet much to learn," he remarked softly, pushing his cap on to the back of his head. "The Valleylands differ strangely one part from another; and that is the truth. It was in my mind I was to come to a place like the house of Bauer Nickol on the banks of the Arn, or to a town such as we went to when there were Witch wares to be sold. I shall climb these towers, all of them, outside and inside; and I shall climb that wall. It is higher than the Palace wall of King Goldemar's even. Wonder is these people let that piece of water go creeping around the outside of their home, when they could so easily lose it down the hill. Now, if——"

"How come you here, and what do you want?"

Helder turned at the gruff question. A man with a leather helmet and a broadsword stood before him.

"Of a surety, that is the Vinegar Bottle of whom I was told to beware," Helder told himself; but aloud he said, "I came over the bridge yonder; and the man walking up and down before it did not stop me."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," Helder answered indifferently. Then he pointed up into the air. "I wonder what ails the weathercock on your tower there, the highest tower. I wonder also whether it be the Baron's wish that it should hang thus crooked and looking as though it were about to fall upon your heads."

"Never mind the cock," the soldier grunted. "Why are you here?"

"I do not know. I was sent," and Helder shrugged his shoulders. "You are the Baron's man Elbrecht. Take me to the Herr Baron."

But Elbrecht's patience was over. Laying a heavy hand on the slim shoulder, he wheeled the lad around to the light. "Mayhappen you come from over Count Eber's way aspying here," he grunted. "What is your name?"

Helder's eyes began to gleam. He stepped quickly back, and Elbrecht's hand fell from his shoulder.

"Count Eber I have not the happiness to know," he drawled; "and as for my name, it is Helder, though it matters little. I wonder whether the Yunker is about who reads books for pleasure and will not learn to play with a sword. My lantern! That is surely he!"

His face lit up and he pointed across the hof.

Rupert, shivering in the cold, had just appeared on the Schloss steps.

"That is the Yunker of Wildsteg-Hohenburg. The Horns of the Hills! It is not strange you none of you—" he broke off, bursting into such a merry laugh that the head cook came out of the kitchen to see what the matter was, and the stable-lads crowded into their door. "Well, Friend Elbrecht, since you will not take me to the Herr of Hohenburg," Helder was still laughing, "I shall ask his nephew to do so. It may be he will be more kind, since we are to be playfellows."

Helder ran across the courtyard, and left Elbrecht leaning against the wall.

"So *that* is the bursche they have brought! That is the lad!" the old fighter kept muttering to himself, as he followed Helder to the other side of the hof.

The heir of Hohenburg and his new playfellow were talking on the burg steps: neither seemed to see the Baron Hugo's henchman who stood below.

"Come!" Elbrecht heard the stranger say. What clear young tones and how they carried! "Come! unless you wish me to search for the Herr Baron alone; and then I might tumble into the wrong room——"

"They are all very dark," Rupert interposed; "and the passageways are dark. Do you know that you have come to a fearsome place?" The heir's thin little voice quaked. "Last night the Ahnfrau walked three times around the big wall. The guards saw her. They are still talking of it."

"The Ahnfrau walked three times around the big wall," Helder repeated slowly. "Who— Why—" then he ran his fingers through his hair and his face twisted itself into perplexed and merry wrinkles. "I also shall walk around the wall," he announced. "And you."

"Never!" said Rupert in quavering decision. "I should fall into the moat!"

"That would be a small matter," Helder answered cheerfully. "You could climb out again. That is, you could climb out, if the what you call 'moat' and that piece of water without the wall are the same thing." Then he grew sober. "We will now go to the Herr Baron," he said.

Rupert hung back.

"It is not yet the time when we must go. See! it is scarce dusk, an hour before the evening meal. Also, when the Uncle said that there would come a bursche to play with me, he said that he wished not to see, or speak with the boy. So it is plain that he has no will to look at you."

"That may be, and it is sad," said Helder. "Nevertheless, I come to no house to live without first offering greeting to the lord of the place. Whether the lord takes my greeting, or not, does not rest with me."

He turned the hope of Hohenburg around by the shoulders, and pushed him through the door.

"You take me to the Herr Baron," he ordered.

Elbrecht sat down on the steps in the dusk; he

prodded between the pavingstones with his sword, and he grit his teeth.

The Herr Baron was in no merry humour ; and the sight of this strange lad marching up the hall towards him did not better his mood. The lad came to a stand at the foot of the dais, doffed his cap, and bowed.

" My name is Helder," he said clearly. " You have asked for me, and I have been sent to you as playfellow to Yunker Rupert."

Baron Hugo gasped. He, the Herr of Hohenburg, send for this stripling ! This was putting a new face on the matter. His keen old eyes looked this Helder through and through. Helder looked back, curiously. He did not say anything. It was plain he considered it the Baron's turn to speak. Baron Hugo cleared his throat.

" Did Yunker Rupert bring you here ? " he asked in an awful voice.

Yunker Rupert stood on one foot halfway up the hall ; and his face was gray in the waning light.

Helder laughed outright.

" I brought Yunker Rupert," he said, " and I had all but to beat Yunker Rupert before the Yunker would show me the way."

He stared at the Baron with puzzled eyes.

" Herr Baron," he began,—it was plain that he was picking his words with care,—" I know not whether it is your wish that the weathercock on the king tower

of your burg should be crooked ; but, if it is not your wish that it should be crooked, it would be my pleasure to straighten it for you." Then he sighed as though well pleased with himself.

Baron Hugo found himself stifling another gasp. He looked at the boy more closely.

" The tower where the cock hangs is the highest in the land," he said. " Its turret is so steep that none can climb it. Also, it is not a safe place to go : there are often sounds within."

He smiled grimly. Rupert's face had turned whiter than ever. Helder was wide-eyed and curious.

" You may try to straighten the cock if you like. You will be killed for your pains," the old man added indifferently.

Helder waited no further leave. He dashed down the hall, dragging the protesting heir of Hohenburg after him ; down the hall and out of the door. The old Baron heard the two go tumbling down the stair.

If the young fool really reached the highest chamber of that high tower and the window, and once tried for foothold on the steep roof, he would fall and be killed. That was sure. The weathercock — straighten the weathercock ! There had been a storm that night when it was all but torn from its high turret ; the Ahnfrau had walked upon the castle wall and moaned ; and the next day the squire of his youngest son had come with the last death news. The Baron sat stiffly

in his chair. Those were fearless eyes the strange lad had. Was that an outcry from the burghof? For all his fearless eyes he would be killed. There was a little balcony at the end of the passageway. It overlooked the hof and the stable region and many towers. What was that balcony to him; or the boy? But——

Baron Hugo limped down the hall, and into the passageway, and on to the balcony.

The courtyard was crowded with people, agape, with outstretched necks and heads thrown back. They did not notice Baron Hugo up on the balcony. They were all shouting together.

"He makes it!"

"He never makes it! How can one climb where a cat would fall?"

"A wonder he ever reached the tower room: he might have been killed within on the stair!" That was a woman's voice.

"One minute, and his broken bones strew the hof!"

"But he has gained the top and grasps the weather-cock! How about your broken bones now?"

"Wait! It is not all day's evening. There is yet the trip down."

Then the cries stopped.

The Baron could not see the top of the tower. There was another balcony around the corner; but he did not go to it. He limped back to the dais, and planted himself in his chair. He could not hear what was going on in the hof.

Dusk deepened. The servingmen came in with lights and laid the board. The horn sounded. There was a clatter on the stone without; then the doors opened; Yunker Rupert, ill at ease as usual, shambled into the room; a moment's wait and the men-at-arms clanked forward to their places at the lower table.

The old man bit his lip, and leaned back. There, one step behind Rupert, the new playfellow had entered. Immediately behind the two came Elbrecht. Elbrecht's eye was on his master. Baron Hugo knew it, and he knew the reason.

"Surely the upstart from no one knows where is to eat below the salt with the scullions?" the eyes asked as plainly as though the lips had spoken.

The Herr Baron did not see his henchman's question. He motioned Helder to a seat at the high table where, until then, he and Rupert had sat alone; and the meal began. Only once did the old Baron speak.

"How about the weathercock?" he asked suddenly, and then could have knocked himself down, for he had been determined above all not to put that question.

"The weathercock stands straight, Baron Hugo," Helder answered simply. Then he went on looking around the hall.

The meal came to an end: the men made awkward bows and filed out. Rupert eyed the door; but Helder stood with one hand on the back of his chair, and looked at the Hohenburger.

"I do not know the custom of your house," he

said, "but if it might be, I would stay here in this room. They say you are the mightiest fighter of this land. I should like to stay with you."

Baron Hugo stared. It was the first time that his having been the mightiest fighter of the land had been given as reason for anyone wishing to stay with him. People usually thought the farther away from the Herr Baron the better.

"You may stay if you like," he said. "And you, Rupert."

Helder settled himself on his back on the dais, crossed his knees, waved his feet in the air, and seemed quite content. After a while he began wandering about the hall. He eyed the weapons on the wall; climbed on to a chair, thumped the shields, and tipped them up to see how they looked on the inside. He looked as though he would have liked to speak; but he did not.

To himself he was saying, "Of a surety there will be a bad ending to my having come to this place. I have promised to ask no questions; yet, if I do not ask questions, I shall surely die. It is sad." He jumped down, and went to where a great outfit of armour stood stiffly erect like a knight ready for battle. He tapped it and tried to look inside of it, and giggled when it crashed over on to the floor and Rupert started up with a shrill little squeak. He tried to get into it as it lay there, but could not manage it; and he fussed and pulled and piled the pieces up as best he could in

a corner, greaves and gauntlets atop of the heap, and jumped back on to the chair again.

This time the halberds claimed his attention. They were a puzzle. How did one use them? Could one——

"Bring the things here, and I will show you how one plays with them."

Baron Hugo had not taken his eyes from the lad since the wanderings began.

Then followed a beautiful time. Helder grew hot and happy as this new sport was made clear to him, and shouted when he tried to use the weapons himself and was tipped over by the Baron, who played at being the lad's enemy. How the old man's eyes twinkled! What a famous play it was! Who could wish——

Crash! Cry! What had happened down there by the fire? Helder turned, stared, laughed,—a short, quick laugh,—grew sober, and laughed again. Then he stamped his foot. "For shame! Let be, will you!" and he jumped down the hall, picked Rupert out of the ashes, and pulled him away from the fireplace. There were tears on Rupert's cheeks; but Helder still eyed the hearth, and once again a ripple of laughter escaped into the hall.

The old Baron leant back wearily in his chair, and his brow, that cleared so rarely, had clouded again.

"I had almost forgotten," he muttered as he stroked his beard. "I had almost forgotten"; and he ordered Rupert and his playfellow to bed.

III

CHIMNEY FOLK.

HELDER lay propped on his elbow in the bed, waiting. Rupert in another bed had long since gone to sleep, and there was no sound in the big room. Helder had been waiting a long time, and he found it tiresome. How long was it to last?

Slowly the door was pushed ajar; something slipped in from the black passage. There came a tiptoeing across the floor. Helder's eyes began to shine. The door opened wider; more tiptoeing, quick and cautious; a board creaked; a piece of tapestry moved; Rupert moaned in his sleep, and a soft chuckle answered the moan.

They stood about the high bed, many rows and groups of them, and they doffed their caps and bowed to the ground.

"Greeting to Prince Helder!" they said—it was as though the wind were drowsing in the chimney and filled the room with sighings. "Greeting to Prince Helder, who has left the Western Hills and comes to the Valleylands! May your stay among us be as

merry as was that one on the banks of the Arn, even though there be no Prince Rudroon to join the sports. You will not find us so bold as the Kobold Crowd, nor so mad as the Goblin Hordes, nor so shy and strong as the Mountain Smiths; but such as we are, son of Goldemar, we are your playfellows and your friends."

Helder sat up and hugged his knees.

"Then you know who I am," he said in surprise.

"The Fiddler Prince of Fairie Town," they said, and again they bowed. Helder scowled.

"Call me that no more! That name has stayed with the Folk of the Western Hills. I had to leave the fiddle when I came away."

"It is as well."

"And I gave the promise that I would play no fiddle in Hohenburg," Helder added unhappily.

"It is as well," they repeated. "The old Baron does not care for song, or playing. He has a reason," and they looked wise. "No one is allowed to sing, or play in Hohenburg."

"My Plume! A reason!" Helder seized his head in despair. "Of a surety, I shall yet go mad. Those promises! Why did I give them? Why, I know not; but when the Queen-mother asked I could not say, 'No'," and he half-smiled, thinking of the beautiful lady whom he had left behind in the Town of Fairie.

They smiled too.

"When she asks none can say 'No'," they whispered. "That is true."

"Perchance you knew of the promises," sighed Helder. He seemed unable to forget his grievance.

They nodded. "The Housegeist told us."

Helder opened his lips, remembered, and closed them again.

"It was the Housegeist who brought you here," they explained politely.

"Oh!" Helder drew a deep breath. "I have wondered greatly who he was," he admitted. "He came to the Palace four, five mornings since, and a fine stirring the sight of him made among the Folk. So the *Housegeist* brought me here. I have never before heard of one."

They were greatly surprised.

"You have never heard of the *Housegeist*, the Housegeist of Hohenburg?" a dozen voices asked.

"I have heard of no Housegeist at all. The name is a strange one."

They looked at one another in amaze.

"In the Town of Fairie — surely you have heard of the Chimney Elves of Hohenburg in the Town of Fairie!"

Helder shook his head.

"I have heard of no Chimney Elves. We have no such clan in the Western Hills; and as for Hohenburg, five days since I did not know its name."

For a moment all was still. Then low exclamations broke forth all around.

"This will not do!"

"Look at us! *We* are the Chimney Elves of Hohenburg!"

There was indignation in their low voices, and they pressed close about the bed.

Helder looked at the grey-clad fellows: they were a fair lot. Their faces kindled and changed as they spoke; and merry twinkles lurked in their wicked eyes. His heart warmed towards them.

They climbed on to the bed; they perched on the bedposts; and they stretched on the floor.

"This will not do," some one of the lot had repeated. "Surely he must know *something* if he is to live among us!" and then the talk began. One talked; two talked; they all talked.

"The Valleylands are many," they said, "and many the people who live in them; but of all people greatest is the race of the Barons who build their burgs on the height of the hills; and of all the burgs of the Barons you will find none half so grand as this. And ever since its walls have stood and there has been a lord to rule within them, we whom you see here have been the Chimney Elves of Schloss Hohenburg: its happiness has been our happiness; its pride our pride; its war our war."

"That is true," they all whispered, and Helder looked vastly impressed.

"It is not so with all the castles of the Valleylands," Nardan broke in again. Nardan was one of the quickest among the Chimney Folk, and seemed a

leader among them. "In many a burg the House Elves come and go and change with every year; and there are broils, but never a thought of the good of the house that harbours them."

"We know of such, and that near at hand," someone whispered; and a murmur of, "Count Eber," went around the room.

"In other days we, too, took in wandering Elves," Nardan went on; "but not since the Great Trouble; for who knows? treachery may come with a strange Elf, and the fear of the downfall of our house is forever in our minds."

"Would Prince Helder could have come to us in the olden days," came a longdrawn sigh from among the featherbeds.

"Would that the olden days had never stopped," sighed Nardan, "when the Chimney Folk had many an unseen elfin guest and it needed but a word in the Burgherr's ear and the hall of state was ours for the night, with the silver upon the board and the candles lit about the walls, and feasting and a dance till daylight. Now, there is no one would dare speak to the Baron Hugo: he is no longer friend to the Chimney Folk. Even the Housegeist——"

They stopped. A great clanking came down the passageway; the door was pushed open, and Elbrecht, sword in hand, stood on the threshold. He did not even glance towards Helder; but he listened, he glared about him, then disappeared.

Low chuckles followed him; and the Chimney Folk, who had not stirred while he stood there, jumped to their feet, laughing. But there was no time for talk: in Elbrecht's place the Housegeist appeared in the doorway.

"There has been too much noise," he said gravely. "Where is your word to the Herr Baron that no more havoc should be heard? Back to your places and that quietly! This is no good beginning for the work we have to do," and he, too, disappeared.

The Chimney Folk crowded out after him, nodding to Helder as they went. Only the half dozen who had been lounging on the bed lingered, for Helder had seized hold of two of them.

"You were of the crew who lay on the hearth in the hall to-night and burnt Rupert with your brands whenever he moved his book," and Rupert's playfellow giggled at the memory of it.

"That we did," they assented heartily, "and we shall do it again. By the blue of the flames! '*Devils*,' he dubbed us, when Nurse Ursula tried to tell him who we were. *Devils!* We, the Chimney Folk of Hohenburg, who hold the welfare of the house in our hands, if the Baron but chose to take it! To-night is not the last time he has been burnt: I promise you that!" and one of them leaped across the room and tweaked Rupert, who cried out in his sleep.

Then they slipped away after the others, and Helder lay in his new home, wondering why he had been sent to this place, and why he had come when he had been sent.

Angry and glad by turns, he had gone tramping back with the Bergschmieds from their mountain smithy to Fairie Town. They were full of joy; they were eager to take him before the King. However, the Bergschmieds were not a quick folk: they had to rest and sleep between whiles; and they never knew that their Prince was away through the night into Fairie Town and back again while they slumbered. Helder hid his ghost fiddle in Thorn Rose Palace,—there were no guards by the Magic Thicket Wall, and the place within was as deserted as ever,—and the fluid wherewith to make the fiddle live he hid there too; and he came away thinking the fool he had been not to have learnt of himself that the Ruby Clasp had power to open the Thickets for him wherever he had a wish to pass.

The next day he entered Fairie Town with the Bergschmieds, and came to the arms of the Queen and before the King's stern eyes; and when he was asked why he had run away from the Piper of Hamel, and where he had been, and how he had come to the smithies, he said that unless he were given his fiddle, to take into his arms down by the garden wall and there to play upon it, as of old, he would tell nothing. And the King looked long at the Queen, and then gave him what he asked. But it was the ghost fiddle came back to King Goldemar; and the true fiddle lay in Thorn Rose Palace; and Helder told that he had been living with the Witch Folk: but where the Witch Folk lived

and what they did and what of their secrets he had learnt he would not say: and he said nothing of the Strange Player, nor of the Strange Country, the outskirts of which he had travelled upon. The questionings lasted two days, and between whiles Helder learnt from Kaldah that Rudroon had been sent to King Laurin's country for safety from the Strange Player and the Witch Folk, and that many of the Kobolds had gone with him. And in the midst of King Goldemar's perplexities over Prince Helder, the Housegeist came to the walls of Fairie Town, and asked to be taken to Queen Hildegund.

"Then," muttered Helder, as he lay in the big room at Hohenburg, thinking about the matter, "then came the promises!"

For the Queen had put her arms about him and had begged him this once, for her sake, to go with the one who had come for him quietly to the place where his comrade would take him and not to run away from there, unless she gave him leave; and furthermore she had begged him to promise to ask no questions of anyone he might see in the place where he went to live, and that he would tell none of the Valleypeople where his home was, or who his parents were, or what his rank; and that he would play no fiddle where there were any to hear. And Helder, looking into the eyes of his Queen-mother, had promised, and had had quick word with Kaldah when none saw or heard, and had come away with the Housegeist to Hohenburg.

IV

THE SONG OF THE HARP.

THERE came another new life for Helder.

Mornings in the armory with Elbrecht to teach the use of sword and spear. To be sure, Rupert was usually hurt before the lesson was over, or else cast down his sword and said he would learn no more ; but the lessons were great sport for all that.

Afternoons in the Burghof, when the Baron's big battle horses were brought out and the lads learnt how to fight from the top of them. That is, Helder learnt ; and Rupert sat and shivered and escaped from the broad back to the scribe's room whenever it could be done.

Long days in the woods with the hunting parties, long, splendid days, when the horns recalled the horns of Fairie Town, and the rush of the horses brought back the memory of journeys in the Western Hills.

Then there were the storm days and the nights, when Helder went ajourneying in Hohenburg. Not a room he did not pry into, or a tower he did not climb ; not a secret stairway he did not travel up and

down, and not a garret he did not know: and wherever he went he was sure to find some of the Chimney Folk crooning in an out-of-the-way corner, or gossiping around an unused hearth.

Then, if it were night-time, there were wild frolics, when not a word was spoken, when the bubbling laughter was checked on the lip, and the mad race went through quiet passages, up and down winding stairs, in and out of highplaced windows, and away over peak and pinnacle, tower and turret, wall and battlement—the roof country of Hohenburg.

Or, if it were day, the Elves had dens of their very own, eerie places where Helder was always welcome; and many was the hour he spent halfway up a black chimney, balancing on the edge of one of their little caves. His legs dangled down into the black pit; sparks from the fire below swirled about him; and the smoke curled around him. His hosts had low, drowsy songs to sing and long tales of the glory of their house to tell; and they whispered and laughed, and between whiles Helder could hear people talking and moving in the room below, or the Elves who had their dens in other chimneys calling down from the roof for their fellows to come up and play.

They told him many things—how Nurse Ursula was the best friend of the Chimney Folk; how he must be on his guard against Elbrecht, because Elbrecht hated the Elves—for a reason; how he must show respect to the Housegeist, since the Housegeist, being the special

Elf of the Herr Baron, was an important personage; and how, above all other things, he must not disturb the Ahnfrau in her tower, the Ahnfrau, who called the danger, the life, and the death of the house of Hohenburg.

But, though it was a happy life, as the lives of lads go in the Valleylands, there were days when a great anger came over Helder that he should be at Hohenburg at all, when the life with the Chimney Folk did not make up for the sour looks and surly words of Elbrecht, the stupidity of Rupert, and the silliness of the scribe. Then Helder went away into a room where none of the burgpeople ever came, and wondered why Baron Hugo was angry with him — since that first evening the old Baron had not once spoken to him— and longed for the freedom that had been his before and could be his now—were it not for the promises.

To-day the anger and the pain was worse than ever, and he lay on the floor in the dim room, and thought of the twin whom he had not seen for so long a time and of the fiddle he had had to leave behind, hidden in Thorn Rose Palace. Where was his fiddle now? He knew well enough where it *should* have been long before this; but all things went wrong these days, and King Goldemar's hand reached far.

Helder raised his head and looked across the room.

The Baron allowed no song and no playing in Hohenburg. Also, there was no telling whether one could play who had so small a knowledge of those strangely

placed strings ; but the Baron lived in another part of the castle. Helder must make music, or the strings of his heart would break ; and, for the rest, the harp leaned over yonder against the wall, and his promise was that he should play no *fiddle* in Hohenburg.

He tiptoed across the room, he twitched off the dusty covering, took the harp into his arms, and touched the strings with wary fingers. He had seen harps before : there were folk in Fairie Town who played upon them; also King Goldemar, though that but rarely, and never for anyone but the Queen. But Helder had heard him in the night-time : there was one song above all others ; no one but the King could play it, for it was his very own. How did it go ?

Helder did not hear the sound of someone storming down the passage : he had caught Goldemar's song among the harpstrings and had forgotten all else. The door crashed open, and Baron Hugo stood on the sill.

" So ! " he thundered. " It is you ! You ! "

He stumped forward and seized Helder by the shoulder.

" Is *this* what they have brought you here for, your Folk and the Housegeist who is always prating that he thinks of nothing but the good of Hohenburg ? For this ! "

He wrenched the harp from the boy's hand, and dashed it against the wall.

"Where is the good that they promised should come with your coming? What have you done? Is Rupert any more a man than before? Does he sit any the less among the papers in the scribe's room, or take better to the handling of the sword? You have done nothing, or worse than nothing. Ach, the very look of you, your voice, your laugh — it drives me mad! Get you gone from here, and never set foot down this passageway again."

"The saints of Heaven, lad, has all reason left you?" cried old Ursula under her breath.

She was shaking in every limb, as she laid her hand on Helder's arm and peered down the passage to see whether Baron Hugo had gone for good and all.

"How come you into this room? None are allowed here. Come away with me! Come away! And be thankful you are alive. That song turns the very heart in one's body. A wonder is he did not kill you."

"There was no harm in my song." Helder protested. He was trembling from anger, and to himself he was saying furiously, "Why did I ever give the promise to stay in this den? That I should have been shaken by the old man! Where is my Ruby Clasp, and why does it not come back to me?" Aloud he repeated, "Ursula, there was no harm in my song."

"No *harm*, lad! It is the song that used to go ringing through these old halls from morning until midnight. The Fräulein herself caught snatches of it,

and hummed it under her breath ; but there was only one voice that really sang it ; the Fräulein——"

"I know not of what Fräulein you speak," Helder said crossly.

They had reached Nurse Ursula's room, and he cast himself down on the bearskin rug before the fire, and drummed his toes against the floor.

"Hush!" shivered old Ursula. "No one can speak her name these days. If I tell you, it is that you may know and not do another such fool's trick: it may cost you your life. The Fräulein was Baron Hugo's daughter. He loved her as nothing else on earth ; and small blame, for she was fairer than the spring-time, and good as she was fair. The Herr Baron chose a lord for her and set the wedding day ; but when the wedding morning came, she could not be found — and she has never been seen since."

Helder rolled over and stared at the ceiling. He did not see what the Fräulein's going away had to do with his song ; but he did not say so.

"The Chimney Folk call it the 'Great Trouble,'" Nurse Ursula went on disconnectedly, "for the Herr Baron cursed them, and cursed her, and cursed him ; and Count Eber also cursed—everything that he could think of and the Baron most of all—and Elbrecht, he would kill everyone of the Chimney Folk and every Housegeist and every Elf that ever breathed, because it is in his mind that one of their crew spirited the Fräulein Hildegund away on her wedding morning."

Helder smiled. The Queen-mother was called Hildegund, and he loved to hear the name.

Nurse Ursula's thoughts wandered back into the past.

"He knocked at the gate along with the spring-time," she chanted in a far-away voice, "when the nightingale called in the woods at dusk, and violet and the little keys-of-heaven fringed the castle moat. Not a week had gone before he was the pet of Hohenburg, for the Herr Baron heard him as he sang in the chimneys to the Elves; and the end of the matter was he all but lived in the room where the Herr Baron sat and the little Fräulein bent over her tapestry. I can see even now how his white hands plucked the strings of the harp he played—such soft white hands they were; they were all we ever saw of him!—I can hear even now the song he used to sing, the song you played; but he sang it better, far. On her wedding morning she was gone, and he was gone, and the joy of life left Hohenburg. And they say it is all because of the Elf called Goldemar——"

But Helder was not there to hear. He had already tiptoed from the room. A sudden thought had come to him, and he wished to be alone that he might follow it to the end.

"The promises I have given! The promises!" he kept repeating to himself. "Not to run away from Hohenburg; not to tell who I am, or whence I come; not to ask questions; not to play any fiddle where any

people may hear. My Plume! I have given no word which my walking about alone near Hohenburg would break; and I can wait no more. I must get my Ruby Clasp and get a sight of my own fiddle once again. If only no harm has come to Kaldah!" For Helder had told Kaldah the secret of the Ruby Clasp and where in Thorn Rose Palace his fiddle lay hidden: and Kaldah had taken the Ruby Clasp, and promised to go in and get the fiddle and follow Helder to the Valley-lands. But that was now long ago, and Kaldah had not come.

"Maybe he cannot find me, because I am housed here in Hohenburg and never go abroad alone," was Helder's thought as he took to the woods. And, "It were better I make a noise as I go," he thought again. So oftentimes he called and sang, as he scoured the country roundabout.

But had Helder only known it, others heard the songs which were meant only for Kaldah's ears; and once as he crossed a stream near Hohenburg, a grisly head lifted from the water and looked after him, and a scaly fist was shaken in air.

V

THE AHNFRAU.

IT was the noon hour at Hohenburg. The Baron and his henchman Elbrecht were talking together.

"What is this you say, Elbrecht?" the old man asked sharply. "That he leaves the burg? Alone? Without asking? And is gone for hours?"

"Every day these past ten days, Herr Baron!" There was an exulting ring in Elbrecht's voice. "If it is not the day, he goes in the night-time."

"How do you know this?"

"I have searched the burg, top and bottom, the past three nights; not only the burg itself; but the hof, the houses and the towers. All night long I have searched; I have waked Yunker Rupert, even, and asked where the Yunker's playfellow was—the Yunker never knew. I could not find him. In the dawn I went down to the hof again, and there of a sudden he stood by the Bridge Gate — the bridge was drawn, as it always is—he stood there and shook himself, and the dew flew from his hair. Then he went into the burg."

"Elbrecht!" thundered the old Baron. "Why have you not told me this before?"

"Because, my Herr Baron," the soldier retorted grimly, "I wished to be sure before I spoke, since it has come to pass in Hohenburg that a man's word will no longer stand against the Folk's. Send for him now and you will see. He will not be found within your walls. Not even your Housegeist will find him: ten minutes have not gone since from the watchtower on the wall I saw him standing beyond the moat, full in the sunshine. Even as I looked, he was down the hill and lost in the wood."

"Man! Fool! Why did you let him go?" snarled the Baron.

"Is it *I* have the power to stop your Elf Folk, Herr Baron?"

Baron Hugo winced and was silent; and Elbrecht cleared his throat to defend himself.

"The drawbridge was up. The guards along the wall swear no one passed them, going, or coming. There was nothing we could have done we did not do. No one could have stopped what he could not see. But that is not the worst, Herr Baron——"

"Well?"

"This! Count Eber's men are making free of our woods. Not only on the border hills over yonder,"—he flung out one arm angrily,—"but on our very range that no one has ever dared to cross before. Our men met them last week, and words passed between

the two. Three days ago they met again. There were words and there were blows ; I doubt but there were broken bones among the Ebers—one of the fellows had to be carried off by his fellows. Herr Baron!"

Elbrecht halted because of the anger on his master's face ; for Baron Hugo was not a man to listen quietly to news three days old. However, the storm did not break, when he at last raised his head.

"Well, man," he asked harshly, "is there any more?"

"Count Eber's fellows told our men to beware," Elbrecht rushed on desperately. "They said there were ways of entering Hohenburg that we knew not of, that they might come avisiting one of these nights and there would be an end of us."

The Baron's face paled. Elbrecht gathered himself for the last blow.

"Last night," he said,—and he shivered despite himself as he spoke,—"last night the Ahnfrau walked upon the castle wall and wrung her hands and moaned. I swear I heard her cry danger to Hohenburg, and the name of Helder——"

"Enough!"

The old man rose trembling from his seat.

"There has been too much talk : I am tired of it," he said hoarsely. "As for the Ahnfrau, she has walked on the wall before, and that not many months since. What ever came of it? For the rest, I am

tired. Get you out after this Helder: bring him to me, alive or dead. There shall be an end of him."

"Elf-brat, now I have you," muttered Elbrecht as he plunged down the hill from Hohenburg.

All through the afternoon Baron Hugo sat and waited, and with the coming of dusk a strange unrest took hold on him. What was it that put the fright into his heart? What was it sent the chill through every vein? He heard nothing; yet the horror grew.

When the first longdrawn wail reached his ears, it was as though he had been waiting the length of an old man's lifetime for that sound. A second time; a third: then the door burst open; Elbrecht, sword in hand, rushed up the hall, and threw himself at his master's feet.

"Baron Hugo!" he cried. "What have I done? Kill me! What have I done?"

A troop of castle people pressed into the hall behind him. They dropped on their knees around the dais, and they filled the hall with their cries.

"Herr Baron! All afternoon she has been muttering from her tower, 'Helder, hope of Hohenburg, come back! Helder, hope of Hohenburg, come back!' Now, the saints of Heaven defend us! She has come down the stair—with the sun like blood in the west—she mounts the wall; she wrings her hands; she moans, 'It is too late! Too late!' She leaves the wall and walks up the burgsteps into the burg. Herr Baron, save us. Let the lad Helder speak to her, or

it is the last hour of Hohenburg. Her step is on your stair; it is in your passageway. She cries, 'Death! Death! Death!' Even as we speak, she comes. She comes for you! She comes for us all!"

Their words died away in one wild shriek; for on the threshold stood the Ahnfrau of Hohenburg—tall and dim and dreadful.

"Why do I cry to you from the walls of Hohenburg?"

She raised her arm and pointed at the Baron as she spoke.

"Why do I speak from the tower? Your ears are stopped, and your heart is hard; and in your pride you think nothing of the days when you will be still and another shall fill your place. The night before he came, did I not come down from your wall to honor the new Hohenburger? When he climbed the tower and straightened the weathercock, could it not have been a sign to you? The night that is gone, did I not cry warning, for you to have a care for him? You paid no heed. Hohenburg is undone: its walls may fall. For whom should they stand? Look at the blood upon your henchman's sword: it is the blood of the hope of Hohenburg, Helder, son of your daughter Hildegund!"

THE BANDIT ELVES

I

KALDAH'S JOURNEYING.

"HOW long is this to last?"

"Is there nothing to be done?"

"Does it now come to pass that the Crowd can no longer carry through a plan it has once begun?"

"We shall be the laughing-stock of the Western Hills if the Flying Guards find us here in hiding and then enter ahead of us," groaned Puck.

The Kobolds were angry. They stood at the edge of the wood and shook their fists at the walls of Count Eber's castle in the open space beyond.

"Let us at least try once more——"

"Yes," Kaldah broke in savagely, "go try to overclimb the wall—as you tried this morning—and be again hurled to the ground, if the fall is to your liking. Three times it has happened to me in the weeks I have been here before you. Twice it has happened to the

Flyers, the lot of them, since they have camped before the Castle—though you will never hear of that matter through them, I take it. Nothing is to be gained that way, or it had been done long ago. Night and day those walls bristle with a watch : not even the wiliest can enter. I told you ; but you would not listen."

" My Plume, Kaldah ! Would you knew a little more, since you know so much," grumbled one of the Fiddlers. " How does it come that Prince Helder lies a prisoner there at all ? "

" Yes; how does it come ? " echoed Puck. " And how does it come that he should have the look of one about to die when he was carried behind those walls there ? That is the word of him was brought to Fairie Town."

" It comes to my mind you took but little care of him," snapped another Fiddler. " You, who hung your belt in the Street and slipped away without us so soon as he was gone. What have you done in all these months we have had no word of you ? Where are your wits that you let our Prince be made a prisoner ! "

" But even without Kaldah, or that smoke-scented Housegeist, or anyone else; he should have been safe," Puck said unhappily. " Why should Fossegrim's blow have had all but death in it for him ? He had the thrice royal Ruby Clasp to guard him."

With a deep groan Kaldah buried his face in his hands : the others looked on aghast until he raised his head again.

"Come farther into the wood," he said. "No need for them on the walls to know that you are not of the crew who lay siege to the other side of their stronghold. And now, tell me, what word was brought to you of Prince Helder's danger and who took it to Fairie Town? Why do the Fiddlers no longer wear the Belts of Fairie, and why has the Crowd not joined forces with Goldemar's Guard? Piece out the tale. Tell me all: your knowledge put with mine may find a way to end this trouble."

"Little enough piecing to be done, and little enough tale," the Fiddlers said morosely.

They had one morning come upon the Housegeist in the Western Hills. He was wringing his hands and making for Fairie Town, and he raved them a tale of Hohenburg. The Baron Hugo hated the Prince Helder; the Baron had sent his henchman out to kill the Prince. The henchman found the Prince in a gorge and made a rush at him. At that moment a fellow rose from the stream behind them, struck the Prince on the head, cried, "Take that from Fossegrim!" and dived under again. The Prince tottered; the henchman ran him through; the Prince fell. A company from Ebernburg darted suddenly from the thickets, calling, "A Hohenburger kills a lad!" and the henchman had to run for his life. He made for Hohenburg; he heard the Ahnfrau calling from its walls, "Helder, hope of Hohenburg, come back! Helder, hope of Hohenburg, come back!" He

heard, and a terror for what he had done seized hold of him.

That tale the Housegeist had from the henchman. Then he, the Housegeist, took to the woods to find the Prince, or the Prince's body, and he learnt from charcoal-burners that, late the day before, a party of Count Eber's men had gone by, carrying a wounded lad with them. The charcoal-burners had had to make a litter for the lad, who had scarcely two breaths left in his body, and carry him to the castle. Then they had been sent away, and the men had borne the lad behind the walls.

"That is how we learnt of Prince Helder's danger," the Fiddlers said. "Belike the Housegeist had never spoken with us; but his wits were gone from grief, and he would have told his tale to anyone. He said rescue for the Prince must come from Fairie Town: nowhere else was there strength enough. But now, listen, Kaldah!" cried the angry Fiddlers.

They had gone to the King; they had offered themselves for the rescue. They were Prince Helder's bodyguard: it was their duty, their joy, and their right. But the King was angry, had put them off, and sent, instead, the Flying Guard back with the Housegeist to the Valleylands.

"Then," said the Fiddlers—and their faces grew black at the thought of the insult—"then we nailed our belts to our doors in the Street; we went before Goldemar's Palace; we cried ourselves 'Free Elves,'

and we came away. We made for King Laurin's country, where Puck and many of the Crowd had gathered——"

"They told us their tale," Puck broke in, "and it came to our minds that Prince Rudroon was safe with King Laurin and that Prince Helder was not at all safe in the Valleylands' castle, of whom so many speak. We left the land of King Laurin, and here we are. We had been here sooner, but that there was much searching before we found where Hohenburger and Eber lived. And now, what do we find? The Flying Guard camped on one side of the castle: having done worse than nothing, their humour is a furious one; they were more furious still did they know we were here. On the other side of the castle you sit, holding your head and moaning. What has happened that has changed you so? Is your trouble worse than ours? My Plume! it is maddening to sit here *atalking*, instead of being beside the Prince. My one wish is to change compliments with the crew within those walls!" Puck shook his fist towards the castle, "and to get ahead of the Flying Guard," he ended with a sigh.

Kaldah had been listening with bent head. "The beginning of my tale goes back before yours," he said wearily, when Puck had finished, "to the time when the Housegeist first came to Fairie Town and took the Prince away with him to that accursed Hohenburg."

Kaldah pulled out a package and laid it at his feet.

"You have been wondering, all of you, why our Prince was not safe, no matter who his enemies," he said. "Look there."

They opened the package and looked, and their brown faces grew white, and none of them spoke.

"He came to me the day the Housegeist took him away," groaned Kaldah. "His fiddle lay hid in Thorn Rose Palace, he said. The Ruby Clasp had power to make a road through the Magic Thickets. I was to take the Clasp—but carefully, lest it do me a harm—go through, get the fiddle, and take fiddle and Ruby Clasp to him in the Valleylands. It could be done, for the chief of the Elfchiefs had opened the Thorn Gate with the Ruby Clasp of Goldemar's; so there was no danger—if one had a care."

Kaldah wrapped the precious parcel up, and put it back in his jerkin.

"I waited two days, that none might think my going had anything to do with Prince Helder's; then I got me the fiddle and made for Goldemar's Gate. The Guards would not let me by. At the East Gate and the Old King's Gate it was the same. I hid the fiddle and went before the King to learn why a Kobold's comings and goings should be hindered. The King said he had given the order that none might blunderingly mar the plan he had for Prince Helder, and, as a mark of his favour, he told me his plan."

Kaldah ground his teeth.

"Soon as I heard his plan I left the King. Before

the Palace Gates I cried myself Free Elf. I nailed my Belt of Fairie to my door in the Street. I took fiddle and Ruby Clasp, and—I had not thought of that before, the more pity!—going through the Magic Thickets into Thorn Rose Garden, I again passed the Thickets, where they make part of the Town Wall, and came into the Western Hills." Kaldah clenched his hands and went on more rapidly.

" Then trouble began, and it has never ended. The Western Hills lay behind me ; before me stretched the plains of the mortals—when, on passing an upland pool in the rush of my journeying, I heard a groan and the words ' Prince Helder,' I swear I heard them. I stopped ; I listened ; I followed the groan ; and a terror went through me, for I thought it was the Housegeist lay writhing there on the ground and that a harm had come to our Prince. I dropped the fiddle —till then I had carried it wrapped and hidden in my cloak—I turned the man over. It was the Strange Player ! "

Kaldah drew a deep breath.

" He saw the fiddle ; he shrieked and lunged for it. I grappled with him. There came another shriek, a roar as of rocks giving way ; a red light flashed about us ; fire rose around us ; and I remember no more. When next I opened my eyes, the grass was tall about me ; the newly opened buds were sap-filled, waving boughs : time had moved on without me, and the fiddle was gone. It was days I could not move,"

Kaldah said wearily. "It was days I could but crawl. It was long before I reached the Valleylands, and it was longer yet before I reached Hohenburg. I entered: it was filled with wailing, and from a grey-clad folk who live there I learnt of the doings of the henchman and of Fossegrim, which you already know, and that the Housegeist had gone into the woods asearching our Prince's body. I left Hohenburg, and from charcoal-burners I learnt where he had been taken. The charcoal-burners were of a mind to know who this Helder was, whom all people sought. I was the third, they said, who had come in the three days past, asking where he had gone. And now," Kaldah rose and turned towards Ebernburg, "let us try another plan. We must enter there, and that speedily. One thing alone in all life is pleasant to think of, the words I spoke to the grimy ash-folk, who sit in the chimneys at Hohenburg. Those words of mine will not soon be forgotten by them, I take it."

Kaldah was right when he said the Chimney Folk would long remember the words he had spoken to them. They sat about in groups in the corners of Hohenburg, repeating his words and looking at one another with solemn faces. They were not given to carousing through the open country: they preferred the quiet of their chimneys to the unrest of life without; but since Helder's capture they had begun stealing into the woods by twos and threes, aspying about

Count Eber's castle; and to-day, while the Kobolds were planning a new attack for that very night, they cowered in Nurse Ursula's chimney, whispering together; and the brooding eyes of the Housegeist glistened as he listened to them.

"What have the Flying Guards done, whom King Goldemar was so quick to send from Fairie Town?" they asked one another. "Have they rescued their Prince? What has that other bold-faced band done, who have gathered on the other side of the burg? And he of the sword-sharp words who came to us here in Hohenburg, who called us blear-eyed cinder-dwellers, smoke-scented ash-people, not fit for the Prince who was given into our care to step upon? Has *he* rescued him, for all his talk of our not having guarded our Helder at Hohenburg? Elbrecht has done nothing, not even since he knows who our Helder is; the men do nothing; and the old Herr, since he has sent his nephew, Yunker Rupert, back to the place whence the nephew came, he sits in his chair and speaks no word with anyone. The matter, then, rests with us. We will wait no longer, and we will ask no help: to-night we will go in a body to Count Eber's burg, and the stars may see what comes of it."

But while the Chimney Folk in Nurse Ursula's chimney were planning their attack, Elbrecht below in the henchman's room was muttering, "I wait no more for help, from the Herr, from anyone. I go to the rescue alone. I shall get him safe from the den where

he lies—he must be alive: he cannot have died!—or my blood shall pay for his blood, which I spilt, not knowing who he was."

And at that moment in the high hall of Hohenburg old, one-armed Baron Hugo was taking his sword from the wall and feeling the straps of his helmet.

II

AN OLD FRIEND.

"FAITH, but I like not this errand of mine. 'Pass the wood and make the river?' Who knows but I may be struck dead when I reach the waterfall? The fellow may kill me in sport, or to change his humour: he has it in him, the doing of such deeds, that is sure. And if I make the river and am still allowed to live, how am I to know that I ever get me safe back again! The woods are full of Folk, and the Folk are no friends to me. Belike it were best to kill myself here, and be done with it; for fear, t 'is said, is worse than death."

The little bent figure whimpered these words to itself as it stood quaking in the shadow of the walls of Ebernburg.

"But *is* fear worse than death?" it went on, patting itself all over. "Fear I know; death I have never met: I must make for the river," and it scurried across the open space into the woods beyond.

Its fears must have been well founded, for no sooner was it safely screened by the underbrush from the

castle towers than—a rush, a bound, a sudden overturning! It lay on its back among dead twigs; a something sat atop of it, clutching its throat with two hands; and a stern voice hissed, "You scream, or try to go away, and you most surely die!"

"I know! I know! Only let me——"

"You come from the castle yonder?"

"Yes. Sir—your hands—my breath——"

"Is there a lad in the castle? Helder? Black-eyed and slim?"

"Yes. Only let me up! You crush the air from my body."

The hands loosened their grasp.

"Is he alive?"

"Yes. I die if you jump up and down a top of me——"

"Never mind. 'T is a small matter. Is he well, the lad?"

"He has lain at death's door—o-oh, the fault is not mine, lord! You shake me to bits."

"Sit up, then, and take the cloak from your face. If you try to run——"

"I know! I know! Ah-h——"

There was an indescribable gasp from either side. Then——

"Prince—Prince Rudroon!" gasped the little bent figure; and, "Grammarius!" shouted the other; and they stared at one another helplessly.

Rudroon was the first to recover.

"That you were my teacher and in the olden days I had to do your wish is no matter *now*," he said sharply. "You will sit there and answer questions——"

"I am an old man, Prince," Grammarius began in quavering indignation; but Rudroon cut him short.

"My concern is for my twin. You will answer my questions. If they are not to your liking, you can call out. The Flying Guard and the Kobold Crowd are near at hand: they will come speedily at your call, and I am sure they will gladly take you to King Goldemar——"

"Oh-h, Prince," was the whispered wail. "I sit still. I do not so much as breathe. I answer all questions—before they are put, even!"

"That is well. Then answer this: what is the trouble here, that none can enter that castle?"

"It is full of an evil Folk."

"What matters that?" Rudroon was puzzled. "Why should they hinder, even if they are evil? Is it that the mortals here have power to see the Elves?"

"'T is not the *mortals* are evil, Prince. The Count who rules in the castle is a kindly enough man and good to all those who serve him. 'T is the Folk who live there unknown to him who make the trouble."

"'Folk'? Elves, Grammarius?"

"Yes, a horde of them such as has never been gathered elsewhere in all the earth: the scum of the Western Hills, ruffians that have been driven from King

Laurin's country, and Elberich's, and all other Elf lands. They form a clan here——"

"And *you* are of their number!" drawled Rudroon.

"What could I do?" his old teacher whispered plaintively. "You and your brother were gone—when you had been left in my charge! I went asearching you, and you were nowhere to be found. I could not go to the lord of Fairie Town: he would have killed me——"

"Doubtless," Rudroon assented.

"You see yourself how it was," Grammarius went on breathlessly. "They found me, these ruffians who live in the corners of Ebernburg, and they brought me here. They learnt from my talk—'t is the only foolish thing I ever did, that talking—that it is not a safe thing for me to see King Goldemar; so they keep me here to do all things which they have no wish to do, and they threaten that if I am not quick enough at their call they will deliver me up to King Goldemar. *And they would!*"

"I see," Rudroon said gravely. "And it is they who keep the Flying Guards and the Kobolds from going over the walls and taking Helder from this Valleylands' castle?"

"Yes."

"And the mortals who live there?——"

"They love the very ground he walks on, everyone of them."

"Wonder is the castle people have not set you to rights, you ruffian Elves, even though they cannot see you."

"They do not know we live," was Grammarius's apologetic answer.

"But why do they wish to keep Helder, the Elves? What do they think to gain?"

"They keep him for ransom, Prince."

"They know he is the son to Goldemar, then?"

"Yes. Yes; they know," Grammarius answered miserably.

"The Flying Guards might have had the sense to offer ransom," Rudroon grumbled, more than half to himself; but Grammarius heard.

"They *did* come with the offer of ransom, Prince; but the Baron Elf, thus he has himself styled——"

"'Bandit Elf' were a better name," muttered Rudroon.

"Had them pitched from the wall; and thus the matter ended."

"Ah! And how did they come to learn who Prince Helder was?"

Grammarius looked unhappy.

"When he was first brought to Ebernburg, more dead than alive, with a wound in his head and his arm thrust through by a sword, we went to look at him as he lay in the chamber next the Count's; and—and they made me tell who he was," Grammarius explained hastily. "Then Fossegrim came asking for him and

promising whatever they wished in return. Their greatest wish is to have the burg for themselves."

"For themselves, Grammarius!"

"Yes. The chief has travelled in the Valleylands of men and learned to like the ways of them — most of all the ways of the Barons, who sit in their homes on the hills and dash down for spoil to the plains below. This the chief has seen and greatly likes; and he likes Count Eber's burg, but not the Count and the Count's men: and his one wish is to have the burg to himself, —free of all mortals, that is—and to rule in it as Count Eber does now, and to hold it against all mortals and against all Elves and to amass great treasure there. And Fossegrim, Prince, has promised that, if they will deliver Prince Helder up to him, he will make way with every mortal in the burg for them."

Rudroon stared and frowned and pulled his hair.

"If Fossegrim had Helder, he would kill him?"

"Yes," said Grammarius. "He would kill him. Prince Helder has the knowledge of the Albleyk melody of the waterfalls, which an Elf should never know. Fossegrim will surely kill him."

"Helder should have taken his Ruby Clasp and dealt with Fossegrim," Rudroon said discontentedly. "He should take it now and deal with a score, or so, of the Bandit Gentlemen within there: then they would be willing enough to let him go peaceably away."

"The Ruby Clasp is not upon him, Prince. So

soon as the chief learnt who he was, the chief searched him, as he lay there not knowing anything. The Clasp was not to be found."

Rudroon pulled his hair harder than ever; then suddenly strode forward and seized the frightened Grammarius by the shoulder.

"You came through a little door, down close to the ground in the castle wall yonder. What manner of place lies behind it?"

"A little dark passage—Prince, my shoulder!—a little passage in the underground part of the corner tower."

"Draw me a picture of it here on the ground, with this stick. How does it turn? Where does it go?"

"Prince——"

"Draw."

"But the chief will kill me!"

"I think I hear the Flying Guards moving near-by—" Rudroon raised his head and listened.

"I draw, Prince. I draw. This way it goes, and this; and here are stairs and a little trapdoor; and here it opens into the court."

"And where is the part of the burg where Helder stays?"

"Here; across the court, at the other side."

"Draw me the road and the turnings, the stairs and the halls, that there may be no mistake."

With trembling fingers Grammarius drew.

"And now," said Rudroon, after he had rubbed out

the marks and drawn them himself to make sure, "what does one say, or what does one do to have that little door open to one?"

"Oh, Prince!—One knocks—thus. And one says—" Grammarius said the words and Rudroon repeated them. "But, Prince," Grammarius added timidly, "all this will do you no good. Even though you do pass the door, a guard stands within: so soon as you enter, he will see you are none of the clan. You will be killed and your body pitched out and the door clapped to."

"That we shall see. Take off your coat," Rudroon ordered.

"My coat, Prince?"

"And your hose, your shoes; and that cloak."

"But, Prince——"

"Is that the call of the Kobolds?" Rudroon asked, listening. "They are good friends to Goldemar."

"Oh, Prince! Here and here! Here. If you have the heart to let an old man ramble in the woods in such a plight as this."

"It is not so bad as that. Here: take mine and put them on, Grammarius. Your hat, and it please you, and that band you tie around your head and half your face to keep off the cold; and now say yourself," Rudroon pulled the hat over his nose, rubbed a toadstool to his face, wrapped himself in the cloak, and leaned heavily on the staff Grammarius had carried,

" do I not look your twin brother whom you never had ?"

" But, Prince, I will be killed—when they learn, I shall surely die."

" Listen to me. No need for your death : great honour will come to you, if you do as I say. The Kobold Crowd have hid themselves on the south side of the burg. Go to them straightway; tell them what I have done ; give them the secret of the little Elf-door by which you left the burg ; and send them after me with all speed."

" But, Prince ! The Baron Elf ! He will kill me—for you will surely be known."

Rudroon straightened himself up.

" You have your choice : go to the Kobold Crowd and do as I say, and I pledge you my word Goldemar will do you no harm ; but—this last word remember—if the Kobold Crowd does not follow me into the burg, there, I shall most surely tell your Bandit Elf that you have given his dearest secrets to his enemy. *Then* see what becomes of you."

" Prince—oh, Prince ! Prince Rudroon——"

But Rudroon was gone, and Grammarius, not daring to follow into the open before the burg, sat down and wept.

" I am the most unhappy of all Elves that live," he sobbed, " and the great learning which I have gathered into my head stands me in no stead when it comes to my thinking, or helping myself. What shall

I do? What *shall* I do? King Goldemar is a hard master; and so, by my knowledge, is the Baron Elf: and here I am with a duty from each of them; and the question is, which must I do? Shall I do them both; and if so, which one shall I do first?"

There was a stirring in the undergrowth. Grammarius lifted his head to listen, and, peering into the tangle, clapped a hand over his mouth and took tight hold of the nearest limb with the other. His eyes seemed like to start from his head. After a few moments the stirring ceased, and Grammarius fell, limp and breathless, against a treetrunk.

"As I live," he gurgled, "that was the Strange Player; and he has come back, as he said he would, for Prince Helder. And here the chief, not believing that he would come, has sent me with word to the river that Fossegrim shall come this night, clear the burg of the mortals, and take Prince Helder as pay for the deed. What shall I do? What *shall* I do?"

He picked himself up, and looked about uncertainly.

"I am afraid of the Strange Player, and of the Baron Elf, and of King Goldemar and Puck and the Kobold Crowd," he whispered. "And, oh, I am greatly afraid of Fossegrim. And I have so many messages to give that my head swims in only thinking of them. What shall I do? I do not know," he sobbed in despair. "But first I must go and give Fossegrim the word which I have for him; and then, perchance——"

He looked over to the spot which Rudroon had pointed out as being the hiding-place of the Kobold Crowd; then he ambled off, trembling, towards the river.

III

IN EBERNBURG.

WRAPPED in Grammarius's cloak, with Grammarius's hat pulled far over his eyes, and leaning on Grammarius's staff, Rudroon made for the little elfin door in the wall of Count Eber's castle, from which he had seen Grammarius come out, as he lay watching, midway between the hiding-places of the Flying Guard and the Kobold Crowd.

"It is all very well," he was saying to himself, "for the Fiddlers to come in secret to Puck and his crew, who are supposed to stay with me in King Laurin's country, and tell how Helder lies sick and in the clutch of a strange folk in the Valleylands. And it is all very well for Puck and the Kobolds to disappear from the court of King Laurin without so much as half a reason, or excuse. Belike by the time their age is that of the hills they will have learnt that I am in more places than they think, that I hear more of their words and join more of their gatherings than they know, and can follow unseen in their wake as well as they can follow unseen in the wake of others. As for King

Laurin, it was easy enough to slip away from his palace."

Then Rudroon skipped across the open space before the burg, and knocked at the little elfin door.

"Lucky it is I often mimicked Grammarius in the olden days," he chuckled. "Now, it will stand me in good stead."

Then the little door opened, and he slipped in.

"What answer do you bring?" was the question snapped at him as the door slid shut behind him.

"'Answer'?" stammered Rudroon suddenly remembering that he had not asked Grammarius for what purpose he had been sent into the woods.

"Yes, stupid. What answer? Faith, the fool has ambled out and come back without even *seeing* Fossegrim!" the guard grumbled, as Rudroon still stood without speaking. "Have you lost speech? Can you not answer?"

"Who are you that I should give you my answer?" squeaked Rudroon in Grammarius's uncertain voice.

"None of your airs with me. I know you too well," and the guard pushed him back against the wall. "Did you give Fossegrim the message?"

"I did. Oh, my breath——"

"What did he say?"

"He said—oh! I gave him the message—oh, you shake——"

"Well? Well! What did you say, then?"

Rudroon's fingers slipped under Grammarius's tunic

and loosened the Ruby Clasp. "He will see I am not Grammarius, and I shall have to kill him," the Prince thought quickly. "Fool that I was not to have learnt the message."

But while the guard was shaking him, another figure dropped into sight from above and came towards them, calling, "Grammarius not yet back from the river?"

"Yes; here he is." The guard gave another savage shake.

"Let him go."

Rudroon fell limply against the wall.

"Did you tell Fossegrim he was to come to-night for Helder?"

"I could fall on your neck and weep: you have saved me," murmured Rudroon, settling his collar and tightening the bandage which Grammarius kept wrapped about his face.

"What is that about weeping and being saved?" asked the newcomer. "He would have done you no harm, the guard: it is but because you are always afraid. Did you tell Fossegrim that he must first make good his promise before he can have the lad?"

"I told him." Rudroon chuckled under his breath.

"What did he say?"

"Yes, what did he say?" echoed the guard. "That is what I have been trying to learn."

Rudroon hugged himself.

"Fossegrim says," he quavered, "Fossegrim says

that the lot of you are little better than eaters of worms——"

The two fellows in the passage gasped.

"That the Baron Elf, as he styles himself, is a small rat, that he has no dealings with folk so evil-minded, and that he will see the last waterfall change to a cloud of fire before he will so much as blow a bubble to help a one of you. And he says furthermore," Rudroon went on, warming in his tale—the two Bandit Elves were listening, openmouthed and speechless—"that if ever anyone of you cross his path again, he will give you to his fishes to eat."

"What did I tell you? What did I say?" shrieked the guard at his comrade. "I always mistrusted this dankhaired Fossegrim. Now we *see*. Water to water, land to land, say I. The chief should have waited for the Strange Player; but, no: there is no time; he will listen to no one, not even me! The burg must be cleared. Look what comes of his haste! This word of Fossegrim's will be a pretty meal for him to swallow. I could laugh: but what will the chief do with the new passage? Get you gone," he snarled at Rudroon, who was standing by, listening with all his ears. "Why do you stand gaping here, bird of ill fortune? No good comes of anything you have a hand in. Go, I say!"

Rudroon hobbled down the passage, turned, jumped up the stair and through the little trap-door onto the ground-floor of the tower. Peering out, he

looked into a paved court with a covered well in the middle.

Two women were leaning against the well-curb, quarrelling.

"It is not the same, I say," scolded the one.

"Was I born yesterday, or have I served here——"

"More years than you care to tell," laughed the other. "What ails the well, then, since you know so much?"

"If you had a thought in your silly head besides sticking a ribbon in your hair and making eyes at the stablelads," the first snapped, "you would see of yourself that the rope has been harmed; also that stones must have fallen from their places inside, for the bucket strikes not as it was wont when it goes down for water. I doubt it all falls in one of these fine days; and then——"

Rudroon left the shelter of the tower and slipped past the wrangling two.

"Now to reach Helder," he whispered, as he glided up the steps of the burg proper.

"I do not understand," Count Eber repeated for the fiftieth time. "A plot to carry this lad away? People living here whom I do not know and cannot see? Clear this burg, *my* burg, of me and my liegemen? Have you gone mad, or I; or do I but dream? My sword, do you think, do they think the men of Ebernburg so puny a lot that such a thing can be done in a

breath? Who is this Fossegrim of whom you speak; one of the Hohenburger men? And what weird thing is this, Helder, that calls himself your brother?"

Rudroon drew himself up, and Helder gave a weak little laugh.

"It is a tale that began months and years ago," he said in a tired voice, as he turned in his chair. "I tried to tell you, but you thought it was the fever made me speak senseless words, so at last I let it be. As for the threats of that elfin Folk, that they will clear the burg, they have talked and planned and bragged ever since I have been here: what ever came of it?"

Helder smiled up at Rudroon, who frowned and shook his head and scolded. "I tell you, it is no laughing matter. It is rather to make one weep to see you with your arm in a sling and your face like the snow."

Count Eber looked anxiously at Helder.

"And all these Folk against you! Grammarius was sent out to tell Fossegrim he was to come and make good his promise."

"What promise is that?" Count Eber asked quickly.

"To clear your burg of you and your people—as I have already told."

Count Eber snorted.

"I stopped Grammarius—as you see," Rudroon touched hat and bandage, "and sent him to tell the Kobolds to follow after me and enter here."

"Did you stay to see that he did your bidding?"

"No: I had no wish to wait. I wanted to see you, to warn you——"

"And you think Grammarius did as you told him?" Helder's eyebrows went up in the old-time, mocking way, and a smile lit up his pale face. Rudroon smiled, too, and patted him gently on the head. "He may have come back and told this rabble you have entered and are doing mischief here, and for them to make way with you, with both of us, perchance. His head is equal to that."

Rudroon unslung his Kobold belt. Count Eber drew his sword.

"You shall not be touched," the Count said decidedly. "Not one hair of your head. Did my men seize you from that Hohenburger scoundrel; have I watched over you all these nights and days; have we all of us come to love you, that you should at last be done a harm by Witch ruffians and devils! But, Helder," he added anxiously, "maybe it were better, since it seems I cannot see these uncombed bandit rats aright and so cannot guard you as I would, maybe it were better—for a time only, Helder; for you are to come back here and live always—maybe it were better we dropped you over the burg wall, until we have polished off this unseen mob."

Rudroon darted to the window.

"Could that be done?" he asked hopefully. "You cannot fight, not with your arm bound up. What is that down there?"

"A grass garden with no opening but a little door leading into the court. On the other side is the burg wall," said the Count.

"Could we not——?"

"We will take you down there, and drop you over," said Count Eber joyfully.

Helder smiled at this big man who could not understand.

"It cannot be done, my Count," he said. "They keep a watch on the walls, three times as many men as you ever dreamed of putting there."

The Count pulled his beard and groaned. Rudroon crushed Grammarius's hat in his hand, and bit his lip as he looked about.

"Do you think it really can be, Helder, that Grammarius did not do as I told him?"

"He is a great company of fools in one body."

"Then you are in greater danger than before I came! Your Ruby Clasp—? Grammarius said——"

"Yes. It is gone. Kaldah has it."

"Then take mine."

"Put it back, Rudroon," Helder said gently. "It was made to guard you, not me. It does me no good——"

He raised his head, listening.

"As I live, some of them come——"

Count Eber leaped up, drawing his sword.

"Count, if you wish to aid, get back to your chair. Put by the sword. Now; we know nothing: we play our game, as we did when Rudroon found us."

The two bent over the chess-board, the perplexed Count muttering largely of thunder weathers as he pushed the pawns about.

"Rudroon, Grammarius often comes here to stand guard over me," Helder whispered without turning. "Until you know for sure, play Grammarius and do not use the Clasp. 'T is safer: if an alarm is given, Ruby Clasp, or no, you are——"

The door creaked.

"Oh, you are here. A wonder! In a place where you ought to be."

Helder's fingers clenched themselves in the arm of the chair; the Count, not having heard the voice, continued to push his chessmen about the board and listen.

"You are to come. Follow me."

"Where?" quavered Rudroon.

"No matter. Come."

"My head has been pounded against the wall down in the tower passage," Rudroon whined. "I have no wish——"

"Never mind your head: 't was not *I* pounded it. The Baron Elf has called a Council. You are to come and say over again the things Fossegrim told you. He wishes to hear the words from you."

"I come," whispered Rudroon. "Only, go not too fast, for I am an old man and the burden of my knowledge weighs upon my head."

The two went out, and Helder and Count Eber were left alone.

"They are gone."

"And I heard no word!" Count Eber cried. "It is a marvel."

"It is not a marvel when once one is used to it," Helder said wearily. "You could see them easily enough if they wished it. There are many Folk have such powers—to be unseen and unheard at will."

The Count paced the floor excitedly.

"We must call out the men, Helder: this folk must be dealt with for its impudence. But have no fear: they of Ebernburg are a staunch lot. We must call out the men to arm themselves——"

"But, Count, do you think your men can see elfin Folk when you cannot!"

"Then how does it come you know so much of them," grumbled the Count; and Helder, remembering the promise he had given the Queen-mother in Fairie Town, that he would tell no one who he was, or whence he came, answered simply, "It is an heritage."

The Count pondered, his eyes on the floor.

"Helder," he said at last solemnly—Helder's ears were strained to catch any sound that might tell what Rudroon was about—"Helder, I know how this matter has come to be: take my word for it, Baron Hugo of Hohenburg lies at the bottom of this."

Helder looked amazed.

"I shall have many scores to settle with him," Count Eber went on, striding about the room. "That he let his ruffian Elbrecht run you through—I know

that fellow of old, the surly kerl—is not the only evil he has done ; there are more. He shall pay for them : this now—added to them——"

"I do not understand," Helder said helplessly.

"The Baron kept an unseen people about him in Hohenburg." Count Eber's face darkened ; he flourished his sword and shook his fist. "Did you see nothing of them when you lived there ?"

"Yes. They seemed a peaceable enough lot ; not over bright, but friendly."

"'Friendly,' lad ! You little know. They are fiends, I tell you, fiends. And the old Baron is not better than they. They—and he—did me all the harm they could in Hohenburg : now, since he can no longer use them against me there, he sends them here to plague me ; here. Can you not see it all, Helder ? Can you not see it ?" Count Eber cried when Helder did not speak.

"No," said Helder slowly. "I cannot see it—all. What harm did the Folk do you in Hohenburg ?"

"'Harm'!" Count Eber was storming around the room again, swearing and waving his arms. "Harm ? Do you call it no harm to have been tricked, played with, made a fool of ? Could I not have been told plainly and at first, I was not wanted, that I could look elsewhere that a lord had already been chosen for the maid ? But, no. I ride on the morning set for the wedding into the burg to claim my bride. I am met at the bridge by the Baron with a face like ashes, who tells

me, ' Hildegund of Hohenburg is not here. She will never be wife to you. Go seek you a wife elsewhere.' "

The Count choked in his anger. Helder gripped the arms of his chair. He recalled Nurse Ursula's rambling tale, and wished he had stayed to hear the end of it.

" He pays for it now, that he did not keep her for me," sputtered Count Eber. " He has lost one arm ; he cannot walk because of the break of his knee ; he has no child, or grandchild to sit beside his hearth, or go out to battle for him. I got me out of his burg and made ready to fight him ; but old Ursula came to me in the night-time—how she ever found her way through the woods is a wonder—she took from me, somehow, I cannot tell how, the word that I would not fight her Herr Baron. His was not the fault, she said. Another was to blame. If I must do battle, go battle with Goldemar."

" *Goldemar*, Count ? "

" Yes ; the Elf Goldemar, who played the harp. She said he had taken the Fräulein Hildegund away, that Baron Hugo was like to break his heart from sorrow—hmph!—that this Goldemar was a great Prince in a far-away land——"

" Goldemar ! "

What ailed the room ? What quick, elfin footfall was that sounding behind him ? Count Eber's words —Why did all things whirl, as on that day when Fossegrim and Elbrecht struck him down ?

IV

KING GOLDEMAR'S PLAN.

THE next thing Helder knew was Kaldah's voice. Kaldah was bending over him and sobbing, "My poor Prince! Oh, my poor, white Prince! But they shall pay for it who have brought you to such a pass. Have you had a hand in this?" furiously to Count Eber who held Helder in his arms.

"Do you wish me to split open your head for you?" roared the Count, lunging at Kaldah with one hand—he could see Kaldah—while he kept tight hold of Helder with the other. "Do you belong to the rabble here in the burg? Because, if you do, let me tell you this: I am master here; I will burn up the lot of you—not one shall be left; I——"

"If you dare lay one finger on my Prince—" Kaldah shrilled in answer, bringing his Kobold Belt into position. But Helder put up a hand.

"Nonsense, Kaldah," he said weakly. "He is the best friend I have in the Valleylands."

"Lucky for him," growled the Kobold, lowering his

belt; " for your enemies are already being dealt with. Do you feel better, Prince ? "

" Yes. Where is the fiddle ? "

" A moment, and you will feel better yet," and Kaldah flung the Belt of Fairie over Helder's head, and snapped the flashing Ruby Clasp tight in its place on his breast. There. It has done famous work this day, the Clasp," he chuckled. " Now, you will soon be well again. I know not whether to take you from this den now, or wait. The others are close behind——"

" We will wait. You could not get me out, try as you might." Helder patted the Ruby Clasp contentedly as he spoke. " How did you get in here, Kaldah ? And have you the fiddle with you ? "

" Let me tell you from the beginning," Kaldah said hastily. " Not an hour since, a Queen's runner came from Fairie Town to the Flying Guards who are camped in the woods nearby and came long since to rescue you and have not done it, and he fell by mistake into the hands of the Kobold Crowd who came here——"

" All that I know, Kaldah."

" The runner's word was to bid the Flyers bestir themselves and get you with all speed from the burg ; for the Strange Player had been before Fairie Town and sent the word into it that you are in his power in the Valleylands and that, if King Goldemar did not give up the fiddle, his son would die. While the King

was thinking on the matter, the Queen went to the pillar vault in the centre of the Palace to get the fiddle, and in the magic box in which it has been kept, there was nothing but dust and stray, thick threads——"

"That is the nature of all Witch-made ghost things," nodded Helder. "But my fiddle, the true fiddle——"

"Listen, Prince," Kaldah interrupted. "Are you better?"

"Yes, Kaldah." Helder stretched comfortably. "I think, though, my arm has been tied up long enough," he slipped it out of its sling. "We will now take off these bandages," and he began whistling under his breath as he unwound the cloths.

"We scattered, we Kobolds," Kaldah went on, helping him, "to surround the burg once more and see whether perchance we might not slip in where many men stood watch, for there the Elves might be fewer; that was the plan we made for ourselves this day; and I creeping closer came upon — whom do you think, Prince? Grammarius, of all Folk! ambling through the wood. I took him first, because of certain princely clothes he wore, for you, and fell into his arms. You laugh, Prince! 'T is no laughing matter: he had been to the river to tell Fossegrim to come for you this night. He was foolish with fright—it is the too-much learning, Prince—and I got from him the secret of the elfin door in the wall here and the raps to which it is opened; but he said I would surely be killed and he would be

killed, and you, too, would be killed, for the Strange Player had come for you——"

"The Strange Player, Kaldah! Not *here?*"

"Yes; here. But, oh, Prince," cried Kaldah, "he is here no longer. He will never do mischief again. He is dead. Dead. I killed him. Yes, I; down in the tower cellar. Listen, till I tell you. I knocked at the little door; it opened, and I jumped in. Before it was fair closed, the guard knew me for a stranger and darted at me: but I was ready. I had my belt; he fell dead at my blow; and I pitched him through his elfin door outside the wall and went on. But I had not reached the stair even before the door behind me opened again; I heard a step, and, turning, saw who it was. My Kobold Belt would not do the deed, I knew: it holds no charm. I seized your belt with your Ruby Clasp hung to it, which is charmed against all but you. I whispered, 'To save Prince Helder!' I grit my teeth, and, rushing forward, struck. Prince," Kaldah said solemnly, "the Strange Player fell dead; dead as the guard before him—and I was not hurt. I pitched him through the door after the Bandit Elf, and came to you."

The sun left the windows where it had been shining and went down behind the castle wall; and still Kaldah and Helder stood hand in hand, staring at one another. But Count Eber, who had been viewing Helder with astonishment as the colour came back to his cheeks and the light to his eyes, broke in upon their silence.

"I do not rightly understand who these people are of whom you speak," he said, "except that they are dead and you have pitched them out of my burg, which is perhaps no such bad thing to have done; but there is one thing which I would understand, and that is whether you, you who are standing beside my lad there, whether you come from Hohenburg?"

"I do not," Kaldah answered hotly.

"Because if you do," Count Eber went on, "you shall rue the day you smuggled yourself into Ebernburg."

"But I tell you—" interrupted Kaldah.

"You tell me no such thing," protested the Count. "I have suffered much at the hands of Baron Hugo. Do you not know——"

"Then let me say—" Kaldah began.

"No," thundered Count Eber. "No. The time for listening and reasoning is past. Deeds come now. My patience is gone—gone. Get you back to Hohenburg and tell your lord these words from me. Tell him I have curbed my anger against him these many years. Tell him, this day the curb gives way: and hear you two my oath. I swear," he raised his sword and shook it in air, "against Baron Hugo of Hohenburg, and against his burg and the people under him, and against those connected with him, whoever they may be, be it a blood-tie, or friendship, close, or far—against them all I swear——"

But Helder clasped his arm on one side, crying,

"Do not swear that, Count; do not swear it!" And on the other Kaldah jerked down the sword and wrenched it from his hand.

"What is this that you are doing, you who pretend that you have a love in your heart for the Prince here?" he snapped.

The Count, stopped in the midst of his oath, looked from one to the other, stupefied.

"Would you have this Helder for your friend?" Kaldah went on sternly.

"I would. Always."

"He is the grandson of Baron Hugo."

Count Eber fell back against the table, and seized one corner to keep from falling altogether.

"It is indeed so," Helder said in a very small voice, "though until you spoke just before Kaldah came in, I myself did not know it."

"It is sadly true and nothing to brag of." Kaldah heaved a sigh and looked displeased. "But since it is true, you had best know it. However, I take it, there will be few friendly dealings between us and the Hohenburgers; the old Baron sent his man Elbrecht to kill our Prince, his grandson; so it is plain the Baron is not of a mind to have him about."

"He did—he—I—" the Count was shaking one fist furiously, still holding the table with the other. But Helder turned and took hold of Kaldah.

"Are you sure the Baron Hugo sent Elbrecht to kill me?" he asked with a set face.

"Yes. I am sure. I have been in Hohenburg, and I know all the tale."

"And does he know I am his——"

"Yes, he knows. The Ahnfrau told him."

Helder went and sat down in his chair, and Count Eber came and stood over him.

"The grandson of Baron Hugo," he said pulling his beard and staring at Helder who looked at nothing. "The grandson of Baron Hugo. Who then——"

"He is the son of the Elf King Goldemar and his Queen Hildegund of Hohenburg," answered Kaldah.

Count Eber said never a word. He strode over to his own chair, and sitting down, began moving the chessmen about the board.

"And the Elf King Goldemar has no love for him," Kaldah went on, now that he at last had a chance to speak and neither of his hearers interrupted him. "No love at all. King Goldemar says Prince Helder has the ways of mortal people in the Valleylands more than the Elves of the Western Hills; and since King Goldemar has another son to be Elf King in Fairie Town when the time shall come, the King has sent this one away, that the Elves may not grow overfond of him, sent him here to his grandfather in Hohenburg that he may perchance become lord in Hohenburg after Baron Hugo. And Baron Hugo, his grandfather, tries to murder him!" Kaldah ended bitterly.

Count Eber said never a word. He moved the chessmen to and fro. Helder on his side of the table had

sat with his face in his hands. At last he raised his head.

"And if it should come, as it has come, Kaldah, that Baron Hugo does not wish me to become lord after him in Hohenburg—what did King Goldemar plan to do with me then?" he asked with a pale smile.

"King Goldemar said you should never come back to the Western Hills again, that you brought nothing but trouble to Fairie Town."

For a moment Helder said nothing. Then he stretched out his arms. "Kaldah," he cried, "I want my fiddle!"

The Kobold's face paled.

"Have you it with you?"

"No, Prince."

"Is it outside with the Kobolds?"

"No, Prince."

"Where is it?"

"I do not know, Prince."

"Kaldah!" Helder sprang to his feet.

"I was overpowered and it was taken from me. I thought the Strange Player had it; but it was not upon him when I killed him; and, if he had it, why should he have gone to Fairie Town for it? Oh, my Prince," Kaldah cried, "I would give my very life to be able to place it in your arms this day; and my life I will gladly give to get it back for you: and this I promise—I will never again set eyes on you, unless I can come with the fiddle in my hands for you. Only,

first, Prince, let me get you safe from out this den, where everybody hates you and seeks your life."

At these last words of Kaldah's Count Eber looked up, pushed the chessboard aside, and rose.

"How about his mother, Queen Hildegund?" he asked Kaldah harshly, pointing at Helder. "Does she, too, wish to banish him from her lord's country, or have him killed in this?"

"She loves him better than her life," Kaldah answered simply.

Count Eber strode across the room and laid his hand on Helder's shoulder.

"Prince," he said grimly, "we shall make some reckonings together, you and I. First, with these Bandit Gentlemen who are leagued against us here; then, with Hohenburg; last, in the land of the Western Hills, where there may yet be some few people left who will be glad to see you back again."

Kaldah grasped the Count's hand. "You are my friend; you are indeed my friend," he kept saying warmly. Helder looked at the two with dull eyes.

"Kaldah," he said, "an Elf comes. Hide." And Kaldah vanished from Count Eber's sight.

V

RUDROON'S WORK.

THE door opened cautiously; as cautiously it closed again. Then Rudroon tore off Grammarius's hat and bandage, caught his brother about the neck, and began dancing up and down.

"As I live, Helder, I have this day killed the Strange Player," he cried.

"You! Prince Rudroon! Here! You killed the Strange Player!" Breathless and covered with soot, Kaldah came bounding down the chimney where he had hidden himself. "You. Here?"

"Yes: it is I," Rudroon said impatiently. "I took Gramarius's garb in the wood."

"And you killed the Strange Player?"

"I have in truth."

"When did you kill him, Prince?"

"But now. I come from the deed. He was sneaking across Count Eber's courtyard; I also was sneaking there,"— Rudroon shrugged his shoulders — "I killed him with my Ruby Clasp. He fell dead, dead as a rock. He will trouble us no more."

"Are you *sure*, Prince?"

"Sure."

"Is this the same man who but a short time since was killed and put outside the burg?" asked Count Eber.

Kaldah nodded. "I do not understand it," he said in a discouraged voice.

"What did you do with the gentleman — after you had killed him?" Count Eber asked Rudroon.

"I put him down your well, Count," Rudroon said cheerfully.

The Count lifted his hands to heaven.

"It has been put to many uses these last weeks, that well of yours," Rudroon went on. "Your Elves have made a passageway from it under your burg and away towards the river. Fossegrim, so the Bandits say, was to have dug an underground passageway from the river to meet it. He was to have come by that road, he and his fellows, since they cannot well travel through the woods by land; and they were to kill you and your people. The Bandits have this day finished their part of the work; to-morrow they would doubtless have begun to fill the passage up again, because of the words Fossegrim used against them. Meanwhile the Strange Player is below there, ready to greet Fossegrim, if he should come by that way."

Count Eber listened, speechless; but Helder asked, "You are sure, Rudroon, it was the Strange Player you killed?"

"My Plume, do I not know the Strange Player when I see him?" Rudroon demanded indignantly.

"What else have you done?"

"I have had a joyous time," laughed Rudroon. "I have done wonders. Listen. Your Bandits summoned me to a council; down in your hall of state, Count."

Count Eber struck the table with his fist.

"One calling himself the Baron Elf sat on a raised seat——"

"My raised seat!" Count Eber struck the table again.

"And bade me say what message I had given Fossegrim and what his answer was. Then, I, Grammarius, spoke. I told them what I had told the guard; and more. I said that Fossegrim's last words, after calling the Baron Elf a rat and saying he had need of Elves to feed his fishes, were that if they did not beware, he might come to Ebernburg and free the mortals from all such elfin ilk as they. The more I spoke, the more inspired I grew," Rudroon went on enthusiastically. "I said that, as I was hastening back through the woods I came upon the Strange Player who bade me take this message to the Baron Elf, that he came that night to clear the burg of the mortals and take Helder away with him — I little thought, then, how near the truth I spoke—and that, had it not been for the guard who beat my head against the wall and bade me begone, I had long since given the message. They cuffed the guard and put him out-

side the door; and I went on with my tale. This, also, the Strange Player said, that, if he were to clear the burg of the mortals that the Elves could have it for their own, they must take every elfin guard from off the walls, they must open the big gate so that it could not close again, and they must betake themselves, every Elf-born one of them, to the little grass garden that opened into the courtyard and wait there, no matter what noises they might hear, until they were called to help: but first they were to send the stupidest and the one of least account to keep an eye on Helder. They sent——"

Rudroon broke off, and pointed to himself, laughing. Then, he leaped to the window.

"As I live, they have gathered already. Come. Look; but have a care, lest glancing up, they see you."

Count Eber and Kaldah pressed to the window behind him.

"See, the scores of them, gaping and whispering in the dusk! Helder. Kaldah. Now is our chance. Now——"

He stopped to listen. Booted feet came leaping up the passage; the door of the Count's room was thrown open; and a burgman entered, shouting that something had happened to the big gate—it had opened and nothing they did would make it shut again. Count Eber, who was still at the window, straining his eyes and muttering that he could see no one and that it was to tear one's heart over, since the gentlemen were all his

guests, answered that the burg gate was a small matter, for the present : it could stay open if it would not shut.

" But, Herr, people enter through it ! A strange man with a long cloak and a hat pulled low over his eyes. He was but now prowling in the courtyard. I struck him ; he lies there, dead from the blow."

Count Eber whirled around, baring his sword.

" The man who has been being killed and coming to life again all this day. Unless it is the devil, I will settle him for good and all. If it *is* the devil,—I cross swords with him ! " and Count Eber ran from the room.

Rudroon and Kaldah were left behind, gaping at one another. Then Rudroon made for the door, crying, " That is a thing which I must see ! " but Kaldah pulled him back.

" Not now, Prince. Let us first get Prince Helder away from here. Then we will come back again—with the Crowd. Wonder is they are not here already: I ordered Grammarius as he prized his life go find them and bid them follow me into the burg."

" Come, Prince Helder," urged Kaldah. " Since the Bandits are gathered there below, the road to the elfin door is clear. Come ; there is not the time to wait——"

" Faith, yes : come," said Rudroon. " If Fossegrim and his Watermen were to rise from the well, this jest we play were less a jest than now, even. We cannot stay here."

"Go, then: I do not hinder you," said Helder.

"But, Prince—" stuttered Kaldah.

"Go, you two, and tell the Crowd, I am here and the Bandit Elves are here and Fossegrim and his fellows may be here. They come, or they stay away—as they chose. It is one to me."

"But, Prince——"

"Why do you two stand gaping there? Has understanding left you?"

"Has he gone mad, Kaldah?" Rudroon asked in an awed voice.

Kaldah, with a quivering face, drew Rudroon away. "No, Prince; he is not mad. It is because he has been made sad to-day. Let us be quick and get the Crowd here; then we can begin to make an end to his sadness."

They went out, and Helder sat in his chair, listening till their light footfalls died away down the hall. Then he rose, stretched one arm and the other.

"My strength has come back to me," he said, and a queer little light flashed into his eyes. He loosened the Belt of Fairie, his belt, with his Ruby Clasp set in the midst of it, drew it across his chest and over his shoulder, and took it into his hand. Then he stretched his wounded arm again.

"It is strong. It is well," he whispered. He raised the Belt of Fairie and walked across the room. "At least, some scores shall be settled," he muttered. Then he opened the door.

"HE RAISED HIS BELT TO STRIKE."

In the dusky passage stood a figure, black-cloaked, with a hat drawn over the face; and Helder, taking a firmer hold of the Belt of Fairie, rushed forward.

"You! Here! Again! Many times you *may* rise from death, but now your last hour has come. Twice you have been struck by the death-dealing Ruby Clasp: the third time no charm shall save you!"

He raised his belt to strike: but the broad brimmed hat slipped back; the long cloak dropped from about the figure's shoulders. In the dim passage Mardah the Witch Maid stood before him, laughing and holding out his fiddle towards him in her arms.

VI

MARDAH.

"MARDAH! Mardah! I do not understand it! I cannot believe it! Where has it been? Where have you been? How did you come by it? How did you know I was here, and how did you enter. Oh, I shall go mad, mad for joy."

Helder was laughing and crying and clasping his fiddle: and Mardah was standing by, laughing too, for the happiness he had in having it again.

"Mardah, why don't you answer?" Helder cried.

"By the Witch fires, Prince, the questions are so many we had best leave them altogether until we are once outside these walls and safe from the Bandit Folk who hold them. There are many against one here: the place is not at all to my mind."

Helder snapped his fingers, and pointed to the fiddle.

"That is one against thousands, Mardah," he said, meaningly.

"If you have not lost the power of the melodies," Mardah added with a wise shake of the head.

Helder nodded, and under his breath he hummed the

melody which he had caught from the Strange Player, long, long since, one evening in the village on the banks of the Arn.

"Tell me how you came here, and how you came by the fiddle," he said; and he threw the fiddle to his shoulder and pressed his fingers to the strings. "Tell me what you have done from the day I last saw you," and he touched the strings ever so lightly with the bow and bent his ear to listen. "It has lost nothing, the fiddle, for all it has been gone so long," he said.

"Yes, Prince," answered Mardah; "and grant that you, too, have lost nothing of your power; for, I take it, you will need it all — if ever we are to get safe from out this den."

Helder shrugged his shoulders and lowered the fiddlebow. "Tell me what has been happening to you since the day we parted," he said; and Mardah sat down on the table and clasped her hands over her knees and began her tale.

"You went down the steps into the heart of the earth——"

Helder laughed and clasped his fiddle tight. Mardah laughed too.

"You went down into the heart of the earth. We Witch Maids stayed behind—four days—for the Sign of Forbidding lay across all doors and we could not leave. Then the Witch Dame came dragging herself home, crippled, one arm burnt away, all but dead. She took the Sign of Forbidding from the door, and

she called me and said I had not told her the thing as it was about the red-filled phial of the Wise Woman of Earth and that she would now kill me for the evil I had done. She raised her arm, but I called her by name and I took from her the half-filled, gleaming phial which she held in her hand, and I bade her tell me whether I, too, had a something which was part of me which she had stolen and kept locked in a glass ball, or elsewhere, as had been done with the Valleychildren. Prince, there is a stirring below in the court. What happens there?"

"No matter. Tell me your tale."

Helder did not take his fiddle from his shoulder, and his fingers pressed the strings. But Mardah ran to the window. "What Folk is that crowded below in so small a walled-in space?"

"They are the Bandit Elves of Ebernburg," said Helder, "and with the Baron Elf at their head they wait till they are summoned to help kill the mortals, that they may live in the burg alone. Tell me your tale."

"The Witch Dame dragged herself along the ground," Mardah went on, "and she led me to a place—she had no wish to go there, but I called her by name and her will was gone — where much broken glass splintered underfoot and on either side stood rows on rows of empty ledges, so high as hand could reach—and higher."

"The empty ledges and the broken glass are my deed," said Helder, as he bent lower over the fiddle.

"She took me farther, through the tiniest of unseen doors to another gallery, where glass balls lined the walls; but in many the light was dim, and in many the light was dead; none were white; some few gleamed brightly red; and the brightest of all that company of glittering balls was mine! She broke it, I making her——"

Mardah's eyes grew dreamy and she smiled and forgot to speak. Helder looked at her curiously: but he did not move his fiddle; his fingers still pressed its strings, the bow still travelled softly up and down, and with a clouded face he still hummed under his breath.

"What happened then, Mardah?" he asked.

"Nothing, Prince; but that I knew that I was free —I, who thought that I was free before — and that I felt I had the power of ten within me. The Witch Dame begged me, for the sake of the olden days when she had not been unkind to me and I had had freedom such as no other Witch Maid ever had, to go and see whether the Strange Player still lived; and I, taking the phial of the Wise Woman of Earth, went. I came to the spot she told me of, and there on the ground two men were fighting; the Strange Player, one; the other, I do not know."

"Kaldah," muttered Helder.

"And between them the fiddle waved in air, now in the hands of the one, now held by the other. I cast the phial at them. It flew over their heads and broke against a rock; but some few drops fell on

them; and, Prince," the Witch Maid's eyes grew large and her voice dropped, "may friend of mine never feel the like! They lay still; and I took the fiddle and ran, and coming back to the Witch Cave, found its life gone. No Dame; no Maids; the fires were dead; the phials strew the ground; the piles of herbs were heaps of ashes."

"Who could have done that, Mardah?"

"I do not know—unless it were the Wise Woman of Earth. None other could have the power. I took the fiddle, and I came away."

Mardah glanced out of the window and started up with a cry.

"Prince, Prince! What happens below?"

Helder gripped his fiddle tighter. His face was set and stern.

"A grey-clad Folk comes over the wall of Ebernburg. It leaps upon the company who wait below."

"Go on with your tale, Mardah," Helder whispered with stiff, white lips.

"They throw themselves upon the Bandits!" cried Mardah. "The two fight one another. Prince, they must be friends of yours: take the fiddle and let us go quickly to their help, for no help can be greater than the fiddle's melodies. Come."

"Go on with your tale, Mardah!" Helder implored. "For the sake of the time when we were comrades in the Witch Cave, go on with your tale. Can you not see? I have lost part of the Player's melody from my

mind and I cannot get it back again ; and, unless I can find it, how can I go among that Folk ? The fiddle would be taken from me when first I showed myself. Go on with your tale, Mardah." Helder's voice broke and his hand trembled ; he could hardly move the fiddlebow across the strings.

Mardah steadied herself against the wall.

" I took the fiddle with me from the dead Witch Cave, and I came away ; and from that day to this I have wandered," she said quickly.

Her face was pale and her hands clasped and unclasped one another ; her eyes turned towards the window as she spoke.

" First to the Mountain Smithies : the Smiths had taken you to Fairie Town. Then, clad as a Moss Maid, into Fairie Town : you were gone to the Valleylands. I followed and searched the Valleylands for you ; and the day after you were carried into Ebernburg, I learnt from charcoal-burners where you were, and in what plight. I tried to enter here, and could not ; but——"

Wild shouts rang out in the court below.

" Prince," Mardah whispered, never taking her eyes from the window, " Goldemar's Flying Guard come streaming over the walls of Ebernburg. They strike the Bandits and the grey-clad Folk. They drive them back through a doorway into a court beyond. But," she leaned forward breathlessly, " more folk, another Folk is in the court——"

"Belike it is the people of the Strange Player," groaned Helder. "Three times he has been killed this day, and three times he has come to life."

"Not he. Unless he travels on the wind, he is still in the Western Hills. Those were ghost people of my making. I learnt what Fossegrim promised the Bandit Folk for you, and what the Strange Player promised; and of the Bandit's promise I learnt, to wait a certain time, before they gave you elsewhere, till the Player could get him back from his land again. I went to the hempfields; then back to the Witch Cave. The enlivening fluid had not been found and spilt upon the floor and my men lived. I brought them here. One of them nearly frightened life from an old man in the woods this day. I sent them into Ebernburg through an elfin door whose guard lay dead without—one was killed before he fairly entered. I sent the others: then I came to you. I thought the many Strange Players would bewilder the Bandits and that we could get safely from out their walls before they knew that one of us was here. Prince, has not the melody come back to you?"

"No."

Mardah leaned from the window.

"The mortals are in the courtyard taking a hand," she said.

"Go on with your tale."

"The tale has come to an end, Prince."

"No matter. Go on."

Mardah was silent.

"Speak. Say anything!" ordered Helder between his teeth.

"No!"

"Mardah, I tell you to speak!"

Mardah's eyes flashed as she suddenly whirled around in front of him.

"I will speak with you no more. As it is I have spoken too long: you and the fiddle are needed elsewhere. You know the melody of the Strange Player: you have heard him play it while you stood nearby and others danced to its ordering; you have heard him sing it low in your ear when there were none to hear."

Mardah caught her breath as a cry of, "Fossegrim! Fossegrim!" rose from the courtyard. Then she stamped her foot. She seized Helder's arm and shook it.

"You know that melody, Prince. You have heard it; you have played; it is *yours!* Now, by the fires that once sent their flickering lights through all the darkness of Barbeera's Cave, you play that melody—here and *now*—or I break the fiddle into a thousand pieces on this floor."

The colour rushed to Helder's face as he looked at her. He took a deep breath; he felt the melody come back to him. He raised the fiddlebow and brought it down upon the strings; and the first wild strain of the Strange Player's compelling Albleyk melody swept out into the night air, down into the courtyard of Ebernburg.

VII

MEETINGS.

STILL playing the melody of the Strange Player, Helder went down the stairs and out onto the burgsteps. The courtyard was packed with people; the grass garden was crowded with people; the space beyond the open burg gate swarmed with people. They had stopped fighting, though still many held one another by the throat; and, as Helder halted on the steps above them, a roar of, "Helder! Prince Helder!" rose to greet him, and sobs and laughter mingled at the sight of him.

"Our Helder of Hohenburg, we have come to your rescue!" shouted the Chimney Folk.

"Helder of Fairie Town, we were sent to your rescue!" cried the Flying Guards.

"Helder, our Kobold brother, we have come to save you!" yelled the Kobold Crowd; and Rudroon, laughing and waving his Ruby Clasp in their midst, screamed, "Helder, my twin, I, too, am here because of you!"

"Our Helder," called Nardan from one side of the

courtyard, "the Housegeist and I have killed the Baron Elf. Also, many of his crew."

"Prince Helder," cried Puck from the other, "we came in through the elfin door and found the Flying Guards beating the Chimney Folk to bits; and we beat the Flying Guards, else there had been a death of all the Ash-people."

"We took them for men of the Strange Player, Prince," shouted the Leader of the Flyers, "else the deed had not been done. But we have killed many of the Bandit Elves; a handful only remains. Stop the tune of the fiddle, Prince, that we may end our work."

"Prince Helder," came a roar from the middle of the courtyard, where a group of burly fellows leaned on their iron staves beside the broken well-curb, "Prince Helder, we heard of your danger, and we came to you. We came through the open burg gate, here, and see what we have done!"

The Bergschmieds moved aside ever so little, and Karl pointed to the ground. Fossegrim lay there with a gash on his head such as had marked Wittig, when he was found in the meadows after the water went down from the land along the Arn.

"He is dead, and his Watermen are dead. They came up through the well here, and their very breath carried sickness and death with it. Stop the tune of the fiddle, Prince, that we may pitch the bodies out into the woods and burn the well with fire and fill it

up with earth and set our mark upon it, that Watermen may lodge in it no more. It is a deed we would do for the lord here, because of the kindness he has done to you."

"Helder lad," bellowed Count Eber from beside the burg gate, where he and his men were gathered, "the tune is in truth a wondrous one, and the fiddle you have found is wondrous fine; but ease your playing for the wink of an eye: there is work I would do, and while you ply your fiddlebow, I find me I can do nothing but listen to you. Stop the tune till I strike another blow with these elfin warriors against the Bandit Elves who at last show themselves to mortal men."

"No need, good Count," shouted the crew from the Western Hills. "The score is paid: when the tune ends, we finish."

Helder dropped the bow, and the Kobold Crowd, the Flying Guard, and the Chimney Folk hurled themselves upon the remaining Bandit Elves. Karl and his fellows began carrying the dead Watermen out of the burg. Count Eber came over to the foot of the steps.

"Look here," he growled. "The wight who has been killed so many times this day has got him gone from out his clothes. I have run my sword through them until I am aweary, and nothing better have I cut than a hempstalk. But here——"

He broke off and stepped back, waving his hand; and in his place stood old Baron Hugo, panting with the

pain at the journey he had made and the excitement of seeing elfin Folk fighting among themselves, seeing them with his mortal eyes.

" Helder," he said, " come back with me to Hohenburg. You are my grandson. You are to rule there when I am dead. Come back," and the old man's voice broke as he spoke.

A fighting man pushed himself to the front, and, stumbling up the steps, clasped Helder's knees. It was Elbrecht.

" Yunker," he cried, " forgive me. Come back to Hohenburg, and let me be your servant forever."

And the Chimney Folk, seeing what was going on, left such of the Bandits as still remained to the Kobold Crowd, and came pouring about the steps, crying, " Come back with us. Come back, and be the heir of Hohenburg."

Count Eber stood, stiff and straight, where he had moved aside for the old Baron.

" Lad Helder," he said, " we have had many talks together, and you know what is in my mind. If I have let Baron Hugo speak to you, it is because he is an old man and your grandfather, and came alone into my burg. But, take my counsel: stay where you have always been welcome and where hearts do not change. Stay here with me, and be the Yunker and afterwards the Count of Ebernburg."

The Kobold Crowd heard the din around the steps. They left the few struggling Bandit Elves to the Fairie

Belts of the Flying Guard, and swarmed across the courtyard.

"What is this?" they cried. "Can one who is an Elf ever become a mortal? The Valleylands were never made to dwell in forever. Come to the Western Hills: they are the only place where the joy of life can last. Come with us, Prince Helder: you know us of old."

And the Fiddlers added: "We are Free Elves, Prince Helder; but we will go wherever you may wish and do what you say."

And Kaldah cried: "I am a Free Elf, Prince Helder; but I will be your comrade and your watchman Elf forever."

And Puck threw his cap into the air and shouted: "There 's many a Belt of Fairie nailed to doors in the Street: you have but to speak the word, and many more will hang there."

And Rudroon turned pale, and he said never a word.

Then Helder put his fiddle under his arm, and lifted his fiddlebow, and spoke:

"First to the Town of Fairie, that the Queen-mother may see me, for it would be her wish. Then, my Belt of Fairie I nail to the Palace door, and before the Gates of Goldemar I cry myself 'Free Elf.'"

The Fiddlers yelled with joy.

"I shall come back to Ebernburg, my Count, and in these walls I will often be your guest. For the rest, Hohenburg, or no Hohenburg, I will be Free Elf and

no ties shall bind me. I shall go to the land of the Strange Player, for I have found the road that leads to it——"

"And we will go with you," cried the Fiddlers and the Kobold Crowd.

But Helder stopped. The way to the land of the Strange Player brought back the Cave of the Witch Dame to his mind ; and the Witch Cave brought back the memory of the Maid who took him there. He looked about him, but there was no Maid to be seen.

Mardah was gone.

THE END.

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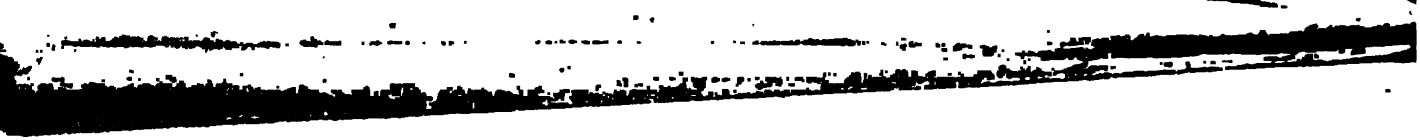
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